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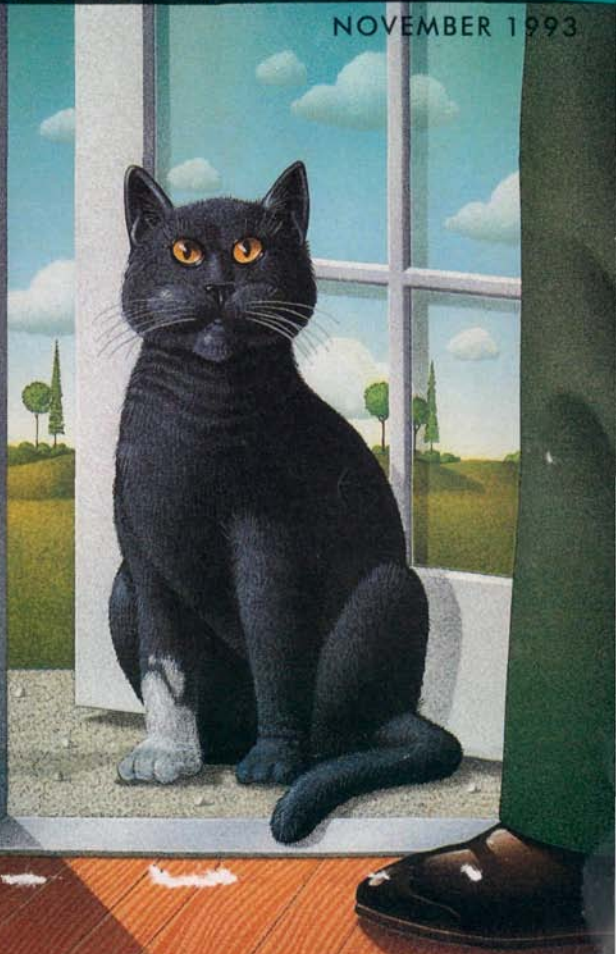
MAGAZINE

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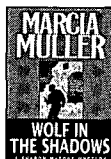
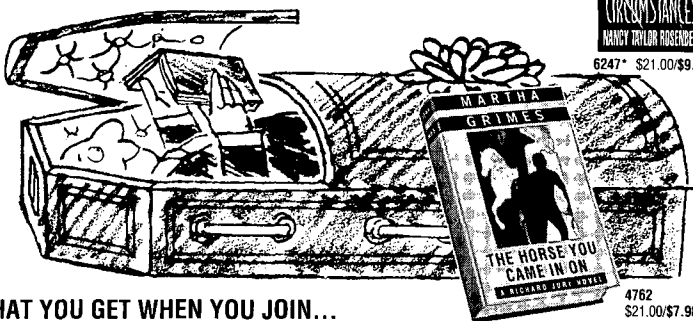
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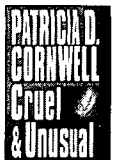
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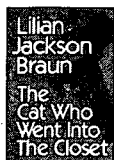
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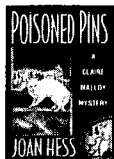
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**W**e try, in our November issue, to mark the approach of Halloween with stories suitable to the season. (Well, the night, anyway.) This time around we have several.

We don't want to say too much; however, and thereby spoil the surprises. We will only note that Hugh B. Cave's "The Caller," our cover story, is about an unexpected visitor, a black cat; that Robert Halsted's "The Old Corbin House" appears to be (actually is?) haunted; that Tim Myers' "My Late Aunt Hattie" can be zipped through quickly if you're squeamish (but do at least zip through: it has a nifty ending); and that Ivan Turgenev's delightful "Bubnoff and the Devil" is about guess who.

Three stories in this issue are first publications for their authors. Mr. Myers used to work in electronics but is now a full-time stay-at-home father, looking after daughter Emily. Frederick A. Fish, author of "In Death Preceded," is an engineering manager for a Fortune 500 company, with (as you might imagine after reading the story) degrees in chemistry and chemical engineering. He collects Roman Empire coins in his spare time. And Olivia S. Flanagan, author of "Uncle Grover's Last Will and Test," is a CPA and a partner in a small commercial real estate development firm. She gardens (has written two articles for *Organic Gardening* magazine), golfs, travels extensively with her

(continued on page 97)

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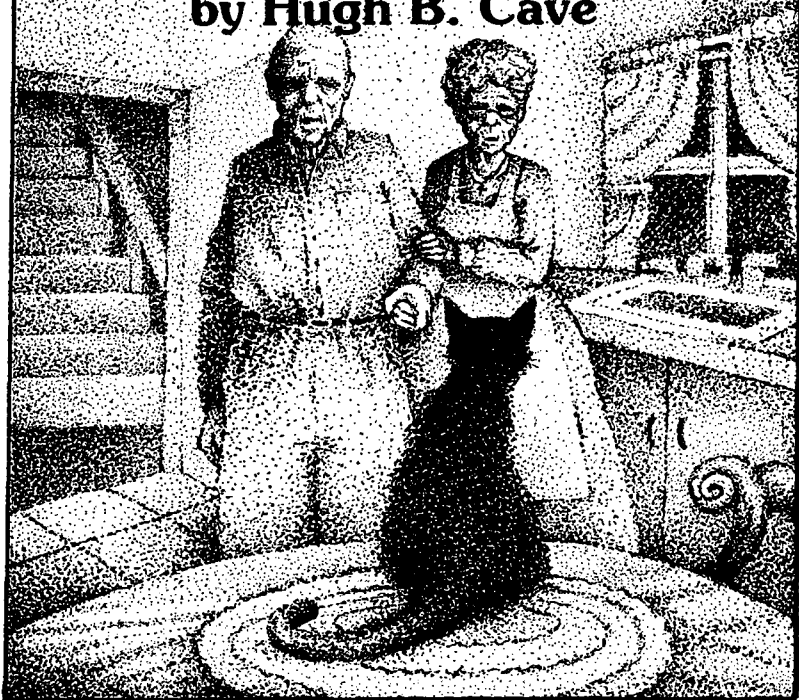
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# The Caller

by Hugh B. Cave



**S**arah Pritchard is my name. At any rate, it's the one I'm going to use in telling you what happened. That's because I want it told *my* way, not by a crowd of prying TV people and whoever writes the crazy stuff in those supermarket tabloids.

It began one summer day in the year of Our Lord '92. I was in the kitchen fixing us a supper of vegetable stew—we neither of us eat meat, I want you to know—when all at once I heard this peculiar scratching noise at the back door. Jabez heard it, too. He was sitting there at the kitchen table reading our smalltown weekly newspaper—July the eighth, it was, a Wednesday—and he looked up with a frown.

The scratching sound came again, like a raccoon or something was out there trying to claw the door open. Jaded got up and shuffled over to turn the knob. And there on the stoop outside, staring in at us, was a cat, a little old black cat with yellow eyes and one white front paw. It walked right in as if it owned the place.

Well, now, we don't dislike cats. In the sixty-two years we've been together as man and wife we must have had a dozen or more. So I put some water in a dish for this one—you shouldn't give a stray cat milk, you know; some of them can get sick on it—and I opened a can of tuna and put that down as well. Then we just stood there, Jaded and me, watching our caller till she finished filling herself.

And then—I know you're not going to believe this right off, but bear with me, please, and you'll learn to—then that little black cat looked up at us and said, plain as day, "Thank you, Sarah and Jaded. That was real neighborly of you."

*And I knew that voice. Both of us did.*

Where we live, I have to tell you, is out in the country, and our nearest neighbors are the folks buried in the town cemetery, just down the road a piece. I'm not going to name the town or even the state it's in, for the same reason I didn't tell you our real names. All you need to know is that the town is small enough for us to have personally known a good many of the people *in* that cemetery. And the voice coming out of the cat that day belonged unmistakably to our old friend Edna Clifton, whose funeral we'd attended two years and five months before, when she passed away at age seventy-seven after a heart attack.

"How are you, anyway?" Edna or the cat said then.

We stammered some kind of reply, or at least I did—Jaded just stood there looking like he'd been turned into a pillar of salt. Then that yellow-eyed little animal asked, as natural as you please, "Have you seen my Andrew lately?"

"Why, yes," I managed to answer. "He was in church last Sunday."

"Did he look well?"

"About the same," I stammered. "Though he still walks with a limp." Just before she died her husband Andrew had broke his hip, falling on an icy sidewalk when he stepped out of the town barbershop.

"Did he mention me?" asked little old Blackie with the white paw, gazing up at me as if asking questions in a human voice is a thing cats do all the time.



"Well, now, Edna, as a matter of fact he did," I heard myself saying back. "Yes, he certainly did. Jabez here asked him how he was, and he distinctly said—I remember his exact words—he distinctly said, 'Not so good as when my Edna was alive.'" Then I thought of something and hastened to add, "Why don't you go and talk to him? Unless it's too far, and you'd like us to drive you there."

"I don't have time," Edna said.

"What?"

"My little cat friend here is new at this sort of thing. She wouldn't be able to help me that long. In fact, I'm surprised she—"

Then suddenly a strange thing happened. That little black cat stopped talking right in the middle of a sentence and meowed instead. I mean, all at once she was *only* a cat, with only a cat's natural voice. And for the next hour or so, until she went to the door and meowed to be let out, all she did was snoop around the house, upstairs and down, the way you'd expect any normal stray cat to do.

We let her out then—or, to be exact, Jabez did before I had sense enough to stop him—and that was the last we saw of Blackie for twenty-four hours. We talked about her during that time, of course. I expect you would have, too, unless you're accustomed to being called on by cats that speak like people. But we talked about her only to each other. Not for all the tea in China would we have told anyone else about her. Not at that time, anyway.

"What I think," Jabez said, "is that she may have been hanging around the cemetery, and the spirit of Edna Clifton somehow got into her. Ghosts or spirits are able to possess *people*, aren't they? So why couldn't one take possession of a cat for a time?"

"Maybe she was just sort of hanging around Edna's grave," I said. "Or sleeping there by her tombstone."

Whatever, twenty-four days after her first visit—on the first day of August, that is—Miss Blackie came scratching at our door a second time, and again we let her in. And this time after she'd been fed, she thanked us in a *different* voice.

It was a man's voice this time: It belonged to Odell Osgood, who had died more than four years before at age eighty-six, of pneumonia which he got when caught in a spell of terrible weather while out deer hunting.

Odell was buried in the town cemetery, too, of course. His wife Clara was there with him. They had a married daughter who lived

in the next county with her husband and two children.

We fed Blackie same as before, this time giving her some leftover canned salmon we happened to have. After she'd eaten every last morsel, she took time to clean her mouth with that pretty white front paw of hers before turning around to look at us. By which time Jabez and I had both got over the shock of seeing her again and seated ourselves at the kitchen table.

"You two are looking real fit," said Blackie in the rusty baritone voice of old Odell. "You must be doin' somethin' right." And he—or Blackie—laughed at his own joke like he'd always used to when he was alive. In fact, if it had really been him instead of a cat there in front of us, he most likely would have slapped his big right thigh along with the hooting. Odell weighed well over two hundred fifty pounds before the pneumonia wasted him away and always made me think of a Santa Claus in overalls.

"We try to eat right and take care of ourselves," I told him.

"Good for you, both of you," he said. "Keep at it long as you can, because layin' there in the graveyard under a blanket of earth ain't much fun, I can tell you." The voice laughed again—sort of like a bullfrog croaking. And then he said, "You seen any of my kin lately, by any chance?"

We told him—Jabez did—that we'd seen Beulah and her husband Derwin *and* the two children only a week or so before, at the county fair. "All of them looked just fine," Jabez said.

"Derwin still on the wagon, would you say?"

"Yep, he was, cold sober. Whyn't you—er—trot over there and pay them a visit?"

"Can't," said Odell. "I wouldn't have time."

"Like it was with Edna Clifton?" I said. "This—whatever it is—only lasts a short while?"

"What you mean, Edna Clifton?"

"Well, the last time you called on us—I mean the last time Blackie here called on us—she was Edna. You didn't know about that, hey?"

"Nope. All I know is—" And like before, though maybe not so soon, Blackie's people voice sort of faded away to a meow, and our caller was again just a little old black cat with yellow eyes, sitting there with a sad look on her face. And after going to her dish and meowing for some more of the canned salmon and being given some and taking her own good time eating it, she wandered off to

explore the house again, just like any ordinary cat might have done.

I said to Jabed, after she left that time, that we should have put her on a leash of some sort and gone with her to see if she actually did go to the cemetery like we suspected. And if she did, to find out what happened when she got there.

Well, it went on and on. In September, Blackie came a third time and was yet another person in the cemetery, this time Thelma Goodis, who died of cancer at age sixty-three in the year of Our Lord '88. We talked with Thelma for quite a while, mostly about her husband and children. Then in October Blackie returned as Avery Chatwin, the town undertaker, who, if you can believe it, actually died *in* the cemetery of a stroke while burying his own mother. He'd left a wife and three children, and we talked with him even longer. Blackie was learning to hold on better each time she came, it seemed.

Meanwhile, of course—what else would you expect?—my Jabed and I had gone to the cemetery to investigate. Twice, in fact. The first time was a nice bright day and we walked, thinking we needed the exercise. It tired us out pretty much, though, so the next time we went, we drove there in our old Buick.

On each occasion we strolled about among the grave markers for an hour or more, reading off names to each other and looking for signs that Blackie had been there.

And she had.

We didn't actually see her, I have to admit, but we found more than a few places where the grass was matted down the way outdoor cats do when they make themselves a bed, and each one of those depressions had some black fur in it. One such was by Edna Clifton's grave. Others were on or close to the graves of Odell Osgood, Thelma Goodis, and Avery Chatwin.

There were three other such bedding-down spots, too. But, as I've remarked, we didn't actually see Blackie herself. Evidently she slept there in the cemetery but spent her days hunting food to keep from starving.

"Food such as field mice," Jabed suggested with a grimace. Like I said, we neither of us eat meat any more.

But then, soon after Blackie called on us as Avery Chatwin, we had a visit of a more ordinary kind. Nothing mysterious this time. No yellow-eyed black cat speaking with the voices of dead people. This caller was only Jabed's nephew, Arnold Pritchard, who drove

into our yard one day without a word of warning and asked could he stay with us awhile to do a little hunting.

Arnold was thirty-two years old at this time and still single, though handsome enough if you like your men real pretty. He lived sixty-odd miles away in the state capital, where he worked at selling used cars. We'd never liked him much.

Jabed and I grudgingly said all right, we'd put him up, but he had to promise to behave himself.

"What do you mean by that?" Arnold challenged with a grin.

"The last time you came here to hunt, you played fast and loose with that nice Mary Wharton at the drugstore," Jabed reminded him. "The townsfolk talked about it for weeks and for some reason blamed *us*. So this time, if it's hunting you want, we'll thank you to hunt things that have four legs."

Both of us knew, I suspect, that talking to the grandfather clock in the hall would have been more productive. Handsome Arnold couldn't even look at a girl without making a pass at her. And before he'd been with us a week, he'd forgot all about wanting to take home a deer.

She worked as a waitress at a restaurant in town, this girl. Her name was Nina Petrillo and her father had run off years ago and she lived with her mother in a cottage on Swamp Hollow Road. She was twenty-six, Arnold told us the first time he brought her to our house.

Later the town paper said she was only twenty.

Anyhow, she was real nice looking, with glossy black hair and a quick, bright smile and sparkly dark eyes. And with Arnold being about as handsome as a man can be, as I've said already, they made a fine-looking pair.

He saw her most every day, and the whole town was soon aware of it because he took her just about everywhere a man could take a woman in our little neck of the woods. He took her to the moving picture theater, and dancing at the Red Barn out on the highway, and even to a church supper one time. One evening when he came in late and we were still up watching television, but really waiting to lock up because we could never be sure Arnold would remember to, Jabed asked him, "Now where did you and Nina go this evening, Arnold?"

"Oh, nowhere in particular," said he with a grin.

"Just riding around, you mean?"

"That's it. Just ridin' around."

"What about the deer hunting? You given that up, have you?"

"No, no. I still want a deer to take home when I go."

"When you go," said Jabed, shaking his head. "And when will that be, do you suppose?"

"Oh, pretty soon," says Arnold, grinning again. "Why? Are you that anxious to be rid of me?"

So it went, until one morning Arnold got up from the breakfast table after eating hardly any breakfast and announced he *was* going hunting again. And took his rifle when he left the house.

About ten o'clock that morning our telephone rang and it was Claudia Petrillo, Nina's mother, calling to ask if her daughter was at our house. I was the one answered the call, and I said, "At our house, Mrs. Petrillo? What do you mean?"

"I mean she was out with your Arnold again last night and hasn't come home," said Claudia in a truly distraught voice. "Did Arnold come home?"

"Well, of course," I said.

"Then let me talk to him."

"Mrs. Petrillo," I said, "you can't talk to him now. He went hunting right after breakfast."

"Well, when will he be home?"

"I can't answer that. I just don't know."

She hung up, but called again about twelve thirty and said the restaurant where Nina worked had called to ask where the girl was, because Nina hadn't showed up for work at eleven as she was supposed to. And so it went all through that day, with our phone ringing every hour or so and the poor woman becoming more and more distraught.

About five thirty, when it was getting dark outside, Arnold finally turned up—without any deer, I might add—and we asked him where Nina was.

He was dog-tired and dirty from being in the woods all day, and sort of just stared at us for a few seconds. Then, "What do you mean, where's Nina?" he said.

"Just that," said Jabed. "Her mother's been calling all day. Says the girl didn't come home last night and didn't show up for work today, and no one knows where she is."

Arnold gave his head a shake and stared at us some more. "I don't understand," he said. "I drove her home last night same as always."



"You drove her home," I said. "Does that mean you walked her to her door?"

"Well, no," he admitted. "I guess I just—well, I waved goodnight and drove off after she reached the porch steps."

"And what time was that?"

"What time was it? I don't know. Eleven thirty. Maybe a little later."

"And you haven't seen or heard from her since?"

"Uh-uh." He wagged his head. "I been in the woods all day."

"Then you better call her mother right now," Javed said, "and tell her everything you know. Because the girl's disappeared, and you're the one she's been going out with for the past ten days."

That began it. Arnold called the girl's mother and she called the police, and pretty soon the whole town was talking about Nina Petrillo's mysterious vanishment. And not only talking about it but searching high and low for the girl. Nothing like that had ever happened before in our little town.

And the girl stayed missing.

Well. Arnold didn't go back to the city like he'd planned to. He stayed on and took part in the search along with every other able-bodied man in town. Even some of the younger women joined in. For days and days, teams of searchers scoured the woods for miles around. Our little town had never seen such goings on before.

The police questioned practically everyone, even asking for help over the TV and radio and flashing appeals on the screen at the moving picture theater. But Nina Petrillo stayed missing.

Our little Blackie came around only once during those terrible days. We'd just finished a late supper one evening, and Arnold had gone up to his room to rest after being out searching all day, when there came that familiar scratching sound at the back door. "I wonder if *she's* seen Nina by any chance," Javed said as he went to open it.

Little old yellow-eyes came trotting in and said hello as usual, and this time the voice belonged to someone younger than we'd come to expect. This time it was the voice of Charley Stimson, who had died only two years before when one of those big trailer trucks tipped over his car at Dead Man's Curve, and him only eighteen at the time.

Speaking with his voice, Blackie asked if we'd seen his mom and dad lately, and I fibbed and told him they were fine, which I didn't know was true because they'd moved away soon after he died,

saying they couldn't bear living so near to where it happened. Then Javed said, "Did you know Nina Petrillo is missing, Charley?" Being near the same age, Charley and Nina had known each other, of course. In fact, they'd been sweet on each other.

"Missing?" said Blackie, peering up at us. "No, I hadn't heard. You mean she ran away for some reason?"

"Well, we don't know. That's a possibility, of course."

"Tell me about it," Blackie said, twitching her whiskers.

It took quite a while for us to tell her the whole story, and she continued to be Charley the whole time, but she couldn't help us any. When her Charley voice finally changed to a meow, we gave her some canned catfood we'd bought for her and she did her usual tour of the house and departed.

A minute or so later Arnold came downstairs with a scowl on his face.

"Heard you talking to someone," he said. "Someone I know, was it?"

"Nope," said Javed. We hadn't told his nephew about the visits from our little four-legged friend. In fact, we hadn't told anyone, being afraid they might think we were coming down with that Alzaheim disease or whatever it's called.

"Talking about Nina, were you?" Arnold persisted.

"Well, yes, we were talking about Nina. What else does anyone talk about these days? But she didn't have anything new to tell us."

"She?" said Arnold, really scowling now. "It was a man's voice I heard."

"Probably sounds like one," said Javed with a warning glance at me. "It was old Mrs. Black—you've never met her—and she has a voice deeper'n mine."

With that, Arnold turned to go back upstairs, seemingly satisfied, but at the foot of the staircase he stopped. "I been thinking things over," he said. "This is Friday and I'll stay through the weekend, but then I really have to get back to work or I could lose my job. I'm truly sorry, but if Nina has just up and left town—and that's what it looks like, you have to admit—there isn't much anyone can do about it, is there?" He stood there shaking his head at us. "You know," he said, "I was fond of that girl. I truly was. If she hadn't run away, I might even have asked her to marry me."

He went trudging up the stairs then, and we heard the door of his room shut behind him. And Javed looked at me the way he had

when we talked about Blackie eating field mice.

"Marry him?" Javed snorted. "That girl marry Arnold? I'll bet."

Which brings me—at last, you'll probably say—to the end of what I'm trying to tell you.

The weather was bad that weekend—cold and rainy the whole time—but the search for Nina Petrillo went on all the same. Still there was no trace of the missing girl, and on Sunday evening at supper Arnold informed us he'd be leaving in the morning. "I've done all I can," he said. "Even though I was the last person to see her, I don't have any inside track on where to look for her. Like I've told you and everyone else, I left her safe at home that night."

I couldn't think what to say to that, and neither could Javed apparently. We just looked at him.

"I suppose it'll seem suspicious, me leaving before she's found," he said, "but I have to. Me losing my job over this won't help anyone."

"What time will you want breakfast?" I asked.

"About seven, maybe?"

"All right," I said.

He said goodnight and went up to bed about nine thirty, I remember. That was kind of early for him, but the three of us had been sitting in the living room, still talking about Nina and what could have happened to her, and it seemed to upset him more than usual. No doubt he was truly weary by this time, too. He'd searched for the missing girl as hard as anyone.

We heard him shut his door. Then Javed picked up a book he was reading—one about cats that I'd borrowed from Abigail Watson, who had at least a dozen of them. Cats, I mean, not books. And feeling like I wanted a cup of tea to settle my nerves, I went into the kitchen to put the kettle on.

And while I was at the sink, filling the kettle, I heard that familiar scratching sound at the back door again.

"Javed!" I called.

Javed came running. He knows by my tone of voice when I'm real serious about something. I pointed to the door and said, "It's Blackie!" and he went straight to the door and opened it.

A gust of wind-driven rain came in along with Blackie. Javed had to lean against the door to shut it, the wind was blowing so hard.

And Blackie—well, I felt so sorry for that poor little cat, I got down on my knees and took her up in my arms. She was soaked

through and through and didn't stop shivering till I'd held her up against me for a good two minutes. Then when I let her go and stood up, she did something she'd never, ever, done before. She jumped onto a chair and from that onto the kitchen table, and made beckoning motions with that one white paw as if to say, "Come closer! I've something important to tell you!"

I felt it so strong that I reached for Javed's hand and both of us stepped right up to the table like we were kids in school and the teacher had said, "Come here!"

"You mustn't let him go!" Blackie said then, in a voice we knew only too well. "He has to be punished!"

I looked at my husband. "Javed!" I whispered. "It's Nina!"

Javed just stood there returning the stare of those yellow eyes.

"We were in his car on Cemetery Road and he wanted to— to make love to me," Blackie went on, sort of sobbing the words out in Nina Petrillo's voice. "Then he tried to force me to do what he wanted, and when I fought him he got angry and—and choked me to death. And when he discovered I was dead, he buried my body where he knew no one would ever think to look for it."

I finally found my voice and said, "Where was that?"

"We were on Cemetery Road, like I said," replied Blackie in the sobbing voice of the missing girl. "He just drove to the cemetery and went from one grave marker to another looking at the dates on them. When he found one so old it wasn't likely to be visited any more, he dug down and buried me above the coffin already in it."

I was so frightened I couldn't get a word out. But not Javed. I'm real proud of my husband for what he did then.

Pulling up a chair, he sat down and rested his arms on the table, then leaned forward with his face up close to Blackie's and said, "What'd he dig with, Nina?"

"A license plate off his car. To break up the ground, he used a tire-changing tool."

"And which grave are you talking about?"

"It says on the headstone, 'Martha Anne Dolliver, Beloved Wife of Jonathan Dolliver, 1837–1904.' Like I said, he chose a grave so old that no one would be likely to visit it and discover he'd disturbed it."

"Now tell me," Javed said, "how is it you can talk to us through this little cat here? You and all those others, I mean."

"What others? I don't know about any others."

"Well, there've been some, believe me. Just tell me how *you're* able to do it."

"Cats are spiritual creatures," said Nina. "Some are, anyway. Tonight this one just happened to come and bed down next to the grave Arnold put me in." The voice stopped for a few seconds, then went on with a note of determination in it, like Nina herself was actually standing there in front of us with her fists clenched. "You won't let Arnold get away with it, will you?" she said. "I'll never be able to rest right if he does."

"We'll make sure he's punished," Javed promised.

"Thank you. Oh, thank you both!" Blackie cried, then jumped down from the table and trotted off to do her tour of the house as usual. She hadn't meowed first, I noticed—she was staying human a lot longer by this time—so she was still Nina at that point but no doubt too upset to talk any more.

"Javed," I said then, "what are we to do?"

"Call the police of course," said my husband.

"And tell them a *cat*—"

"What else? If they want to think we've lost our minds, that's up to them. But even if they do, they'll go out there to the cemetery and look. You can bank on it." He reached for my hand. "Come on, Sarah. Let's call them."

Have I told you our telephone is on a table in the hall, at the foot of the stairs? Well, it is. We went to it and Javed took it up and dialed the number. We don't have that fancy 911 thing in our small town; you dial the police station. The number was on a list right there before the phone.

I heard the phone at the station ringing. Then from the staircase behind me I heard the voice of Arnold Pritchard, telling Javed to put the phone down. "Or," Arnold snarled, "I'll drop you where you stand."

We both turned, Javed still holding the telephone to his ear, and there was Arnold, in his pajamas, halfway down the stairs with his hunting rifle. He aimed the gun at us. "Put it down," he snarled again. "Right now! This minute!"

It seemed to take forever for Javed to lower the phone from his ear.

"She was here, wasn't she?" Arnold screamed in a voice like—well, like he was a child again, on the verge of having hysterics. "I didn't kill her, did I? She got out of there and came here to tell you. I heard her!" His hands were shaking so hard I thought



the gun would go off by itself and probably kill one of us, and my heart all but stopped beating. "Where is she?" Arnold shouted. "Where'd she go?"

He was crazy, that's what he was. Plain crazy, from hearing the voice of that girl he'd murdered and gone to such pains to bury in a place where she would never be found.

But it wasn't Javed or me who answered him.

It was the same voice again—Nina's—from the darkness on the landing above him.

"I'm right here, Arnold," it said. And something even darker than the darkness—except for one little patch of white—launched itself from the upstairs hall and landed in a scratching, clawing heap on Arnold's head.

The rifle flew out of Arnold's hands and got to the bottom of the stairs long before Arnold himself finished falling down them. Javed had plenty of time to snatch it up. So when Arnold finally reached the bottom and managed to scramble back onto his feet, there was Javed pointing the weapon straight at him and saying to me, "Call the police, Sarah. Tell them we have Nina's killer right here and they should come and get him." And to Arnold he added, "You make one move, mister, and there'll be another grave in that cemetery, I promise you."

So there you are. The police came and took Javed's no-good nephew away, and then, in spite of all that rain and wind, they went on out to the cemetery. Javed went with them. Sure enough, someone had dug up the sod over that old grave and replaced it, and when they took it up again, using a searchlight on the police car to light up what they were doing, they found Nina Petrillo buried there, and she'd been choked to death like she said.

The man who killed her is in prison now for the rest of his life, where he belongs. As for Blackie, when we looked for her that night after Arnold got back from the cemetery, we couldn't find her. With so many people coming and going, she must have slipped out sometime when the door was opened. But she came calling again a few days later and talked to us in yet another voice from the cemetery, and she still visits us every so often.

She's getting pretty old now, though. It can't go on much longer.

We'll miss that little black cat when she dies. If we know about it when it happens, and can find her, we hope to get permission to bury her right there in the cemetery among her many friends.

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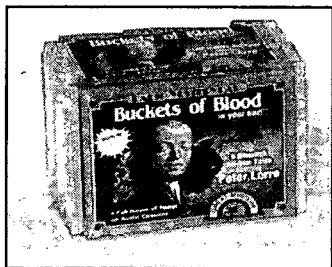
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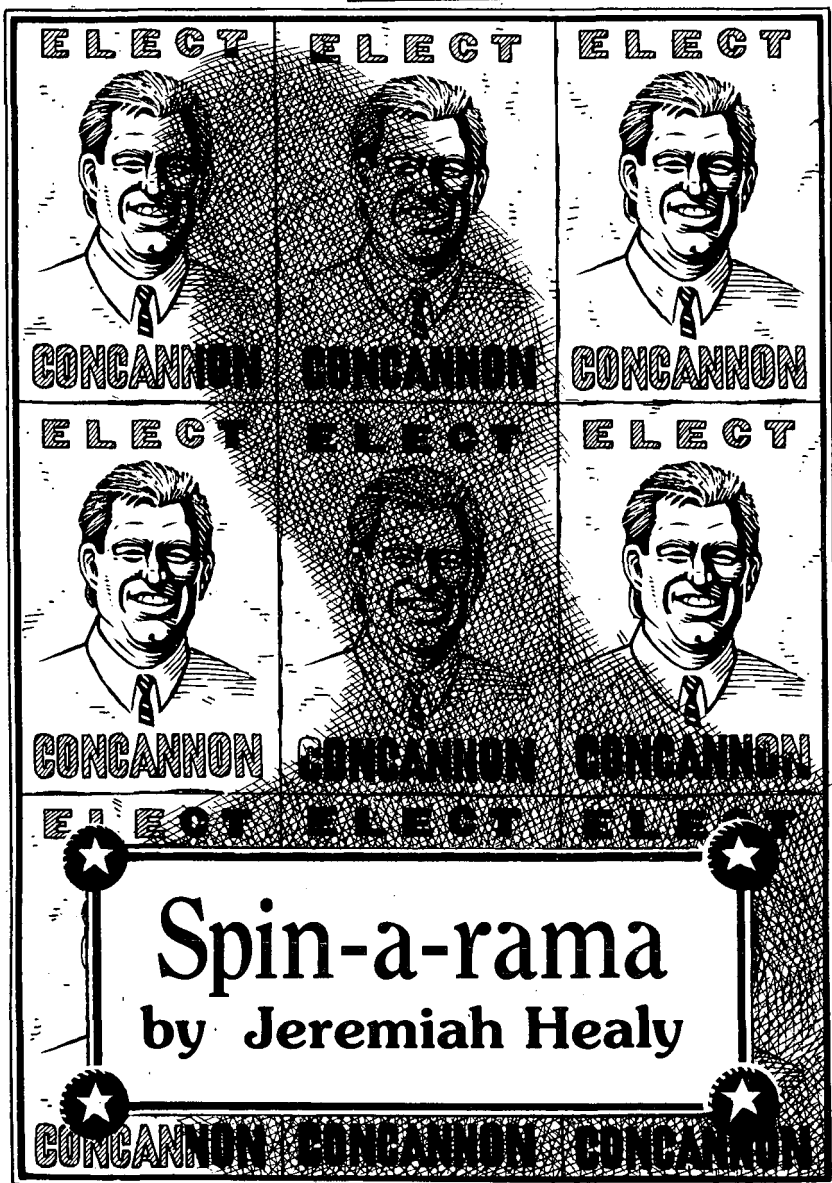


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**T**he campaign headquarters for Riley Concannon was a storefront on the main street of the district's largest town. There were catchy posters taped in the windows and pleated buntings draped over them, the buntings flapping a little in the October breeze. I parked my old Honda Prelude at the curb and walked toward the door.

Inside the storefront, the colors red, white, and blue figured heavily in the decor. Volunteers staffed telephones that seemed hastily installed, the cables tied in bunches with those toothy plastic things that come with garbage bags. There were maps on the wall and coffee stains on the floor and card tables buckling under the weight of issue flyers that just had to be printed on recycled paper. The volunteers tended toward the young, with a sprinkling of cheery retired folks, mostly females.

A spry woman in her seventies bounded up from behind a counter where she'd been stuffing envelopes. The name-tag over her left breast read "Doris" in curly, Palmer-style handwriting.

She said, "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Riley Concannon."

"Can I tell him your name?"

"Better not."

Doris looked at me, then decided against asking her next question. "One minute, please."

She walked toward the back of the space, touching the cardigan sleeve of a burly old gent in a Boston Bruins cap who was using a sponge to wet and seal envelopes. Doris leaned down and probably whispered something to him, because he nodded grimly and stopped with the envelopes and watched me until she reappeared.

The woman with Doris was about forty, five five and a medium build under a gray suit. She had sharp features and a wary smile. Her reddish hair was thick and ripply, pulled back behind her head with the sides bowing a little as they went past her ears.

The smile stayed wary as she thanked Doris and came up to me alone. In a low voice, she said, "Can I help you?"

"Riley Concannon called and asked me to come here."

The smile widened, but the voice stayed low. "John Francis Cuddy?"

I nodded.

Her hand came up to shake mine brusquely. "Nona Shapiro. I'm Riley's campaign manager. We appreciate your discretion."

"We won't look discreet much longer out here in the boiler room."

Her turn to nod.

As we moved toward the back of the building, I could feel the eyes of Doris and her burly friend on me, but there wasn't much I could do about it. Shapiro took me down a corridor and pulled open an old six-paned door that led to an office best described as cluttered. A broad-shouldered man about my age rose from behind a desk cramped into the corner. He had a buy-you-a-drink? grin and a nose to go with it, the cartilage broken honestly, the capillaries probably a little less so. His hair was sandy and professionally styled, the tie tugged down and the shirtsleeves rolled up eight inches before the elbow. He stayed behind the desk, so I can't say much about his trousers.

The hand extended itself on its own before he said, "Riley Concannon."

The firm shake of a man who wishes he could spend more time with you. "Mr. Concannon, John Cuddy."

"I don't know much about how the private investigator business works, but we really appreciate your coming up on such short notice."

I felt twice as appreciated as I had before. "Only a twenty mile drive, and you sounded pretty urgent on the phone."

Concannon tilted his head, gauging something. "So why don't we cut short the preliminaries?"

"Since I'm on an hourly basis, it might make sense."

The bar grin again. "I like a man who gets down to business. Have a seat. Nona?"

Concannon resettled into his desk chair, Shapiro tapping a visitor's chair for me while taking one to my right.

She said, "What do you know about Riley, Mr. Cuddy?"

I said, "If we're going to call him Riley, you can call me John."

Shapiro didn't move her head to gauge me the way Concannon had. She just bored in with her eyes. "Meaning?"

"Meaning if it's his problem, why doesn't he tell me about it?"

Concannon said, "Nona's just looking out for the candidate, John."

I glanced from her to him. "I don't know anything."

Concannon's face clouded a little. "What?"

"I'm answering her original question. I don't know anything about you."

Shapiro said, "Riley was the best Democratic selectman the town of Beacon Harbor ever had. When the Republican incumbent for the state senate seat from this district decided



to step aside to accept a judgeship, our party nominated Riley in a heartbeat to run against the Republican challenger, Thomas Whiting."

Her last sentence sounded practiced, like she'd polished it for a press release. "Isn't Whiting a state rep now?"

Concannon said, "That's right, John. I know him pretty well. Hell, we both live in Beacon Harbor, our kids even go to the same school. He's represented this area for almost six years at the statehouse."

"Sounds like he's got a head start on you."

Shapiro said, "In more ways than one. This district's heavily suburban with some really old money, including Whiting's. It's voted Republican since Lincoln was inaugurated."

"So far your kind of problem doesn't sound like my kind of problem."

Concannon sighed and used a key to open a drawer in his desk. He rummaged under something, then came out with an envelope that was too short to be from a business and too narrow to hold a greeting card.

Shapiro said, "We have to be sure that what we're about to show you goes no farther than this room."

"There's a confidentiality statute in Massachusetts that prevents me from revealing

anything to anybody except a judge under the right compulsion. I'm not a lawyer, so I'm not sure what 'the right compulsion' would have to be, but as far as I know, there've been no cases interpreting that."

Concannon fanned himself absently with the envelope. "Thought you said you weren't a lawyer?"

I shifted in my chair. "Look, you want a private investigator, you could have your pick. I happen to know who referred you to me, because that lawyer called me about two minutes before you did this morning. You asked him whether he could recommend me, he told you he could because I kept my mouth shut after a very bad case went sour for him. You can rely on me, or you can rely on the confidentiality statute and somebody else. Your choice."

Concannon said, "Nona?"

She looked at him.

He said, "I'm persuaded."

Shapiro looked back to me. "I am, too. Show it to him."

Concannon flipped the envelope toward my side of the desk as though he were dealing poker. "Read it to yourself, okay? I'm pretty sick of it."

The return address was embossed in brown raised ink. Just three initials, "E.O.P.," with periods after them, but an address of "Olde Marsh Lane,"

no street number, in Beacon Harbor. I opened the flap and took out a parchment piece of notepaper embossed in the same ink with the full name "Evelyn Otis Poole" at the top. It didn't take long to read the note:

*Dear Mr. Concannon,*

*You may recall our meeting at the Friends of the Library breakfast last month. While I was pleased to be introduced to your son, I am afraid I bear rather disturbing news about him.*

*Last Wednesday, while shopping in Boston, I was shocked to see your son in the company of a disreputable boy. I observed them for only a few moments, but it was evident that the second boy was what I believe is called a "street hustler," and they entered an alley together off Boylston Street.*

*Obviously, I did not remain to see them emerge. However, I do feel it my duty to alert you to this appalling situation and provide you the opportunity to correct it, if possible.*

*Very truly yours,  
Evelyn Otis Poole*

I reread the letter. The hand-

writing was crabbed but had a few flourishes that compared to Doris's nametag. Then I folded the notepaper, put it back in the envelope, and returned the package to Concannon. "Well, you have a problem."

He locked the thing in his drawer. "Kevin's the one with the problem."

"Is that your son's name?"

"Yes."

I said, "Being gay isn't the problem. If Kevin's hanging out with the sparrows on lower Boylston, though, he's running one hell of a health risk."

Concannon started to say something, then bit it back and shook his head.

Shapiro filled in for him. "You see, John, Tom Whiting is an upstanding, family-values kind of candidate."

Concannon said, "And I'm not?"

She looked at him. "Riley, please?"

He shook his head some more but shut up.

Shapiro came back to me. "If this Poole woman ever approaches Whiting or one of his people with her story, there's no way I can run it through the spin-a-rama."

"The what?"

"The spin-a-rama. You know, put a spin on the story that would sell through to the voters."

I said, "Any chance this is a setup by the other camp?"

"I don't think so. That Friends of the Library event was on the level."

Concannon said, "Family thing, everybody gets to meet the candidates and the spouses and all."

Shapiro seemed to hold her breath, as though she were relieved that's all he had to say on the subject. "After we got her letter, I called Poole on the phone."

I said, "Something like this, you didn't see her personally?"

Shapiro said, "I remembered her from the breakfast. One of the staunch types, the kind who'd send back her eggs if they were a little runny. Besides, I—we weren't sure how seriously to take this."

"And?"

"And Miss Poole—she made a real point of that, by the way, 'Miss,' not 'Miz'—was sure she wasn't mistaken."

I turned to Concannon. "Have you asked your son about it?"

He swallowed hard. "It's not the kind of thing I usually bring up with him, no."

"I meant, maybe there's a reasonable explanation."

Shapiro said, "We've gone through and over this, Riley and I. What we'd like you to do

is try to find a reasonable explanation."

"I don't get you."

Concannon said, "We want you to follow Kevin. Not for a week, like spying on him or anything. Just try to figure out whether what Poole says is true."

"And if it is?"

Shapiro cut in. "Then we want a couple of photographs, enough evidence so Riley knows he'd be quitting a lost race instead of dropping out of just a tough one too early."

"Photos? Why not simply take my word for it?"

Concannon's voice cracked with emotion. "Because I want to have something in my pocket if I have to talk to my son about this, John. I want him to know that we—his mother and I—are concerned about his health, both medical and mental. If you find out Poole's right, and Kevin denies it, I want to be able to confront him with some proof without your having to be there. I want to force him to seek help."

"I don't think that's the way to do it."

"It'd be my way, and I'm his father."

Shapiro said, "Will you help us?"

I thought about it. If I passed on the job, somebody else would still do it, maybe somebody

who'd try to sell the results both ways. Or somebody who'd tell Concannon, "Hey, no problem," then shake down the kid for as many years as it took him to get out of the house.

I said, "What do you have in mind?"

She glanced to Concannon. "Riley, check me on this. I think all you need to do, John, is follow Kevin this Wednesday."

Concannon said, "Kevin gets out of school at one on Wednesdays."

"Following somebody by car isn't as easy as it looks on TV."

Shapiro shook her head. "No, no. Kevin doesn't drive yet. If he did go to Boston, it would be by train."

I said, "Not many commuters that time of day. I could probably just meet the train at North Station in Boston, pick him out as he left the platform."

Concannon said, "That makes sense."

"You have a picture of him?"

The candidate didn't have to dip into the drawer. He spun a photo toward me. It showed a dozen teenagers posed standing and kneeling under a banner that said "Civics Club." Two of the boys had sandy hair and a hint of Concannon's shoulders, but there was no caption. "Which one is he?"

Concannon said, "Kevin's on the far right. I thought this shot would show you how he looks in relation to other boys his age."

I studied the photo. The boy had an anxious smile, like he was afraid the flash would go off before he was ready. "Can I take this?"

"I'd rather you didn't. I had to borrow it from a teacher at Kevin's school."

Okay. I returned it to him. "When do you want to hear back from me?"

Shapiro said, "Yesterday."

**"H**ey, John Cuddy! I thought you'd be coming up last summer."

"For the beach, you mean?"

"Yeah, I told you, Beacon Harbor's got the nicest sand on the north shore, and the parking's still just five bucks, even—"

"On the weekends. I remember, sergeant."

"You remember that, you also got to remember that I don't like the 'sergeant' stuff. I'm outa uniforms to stay. Sit down."

I took the chair next to Joe Patrizzi's desk on the second floor of the police station. There was a nice view of an autumn-dotted hillside out the window.

A benny you tended not to get in the city.

Patrizzi slurped some coffee from a mug with DAD IS THE GREATEST baked into the side of it. "So, what can I do you for?"

"Nothing this trip. Just a courtesy call, let you know I'm poking around a little up here."

He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. "The killing we had last spring?"

"No, I'm finished with that, far as I know."

"This poking you're doing, you figure it'll draw some blood?"

"Not the way it looks right now."

Patrizzi nodded judiciously. "You do me a favor, huh? Its looks start to change any, you pick up the phone, let me know."

"If I can."

"If. That don't sound too courteous to me, Cuddy."

The narrow macadam skirted the harbor and a rocky bluff before straightening out into a country lane. I finally saw a converted cottage overlooking about five acres of salt marsh. If you can call a sprawling twelve or fifteen rooms a "cottage." That's what the sign on Olde Marsh Lane called it, though. "The Poole Cottage." The only building in sight on Olde Marsh Lane, too. Prob-

bly the way Miss Poole wanted it.

I walked up the flagstone path to the weathered-shingle porch and forest-green door, crickets chirping from the meadow grass. Riley Concannon wouldn't be too keen on my seeing his pen pal, but I wanted to get a look at her from a credibility standpoint before I cooled my heels in a train station for an hour or so on Wednesday.

The woman who answered my knock was pushing sixty and dressed rustically, like an advertisement from L. L. Bean before it got fashionable. Her brown and gray hair was short all around, barely touching her collar in the back. "Yes?"

"Miss Poole?"

"Yes."

"My name's John Francis. I'm investigating the situation you described in a letter to Mr. Concannon."

"Investigating? Oh my word, do come in."

You have money long enough, maybe other people stop trying to take it from you and you grow to trust them. She led me into a comfortable living room with antique furniture so good it probably never would look old. She asked if I'd like tea, and I declined because it was obvious that the woman really wanted to talk with me.

After we sat down, she said, "I was hoping someone would take my note seriously."

"We do, ma'am. But because of the delicacy of the matter, I have to ask you to promise not to reveal anything we discuss to anyone."

"Oh, of course."

"I wonder, can you elaborate on what you said in the letter?"

"Well, yes, at least a bit. I'd taken the ten oh-four into Boston to do some shopping. I cabbied from North Station to Copley Place, but it's just so tourist-oriented, I tend never to stay for very long."

"I agree completely."

"I visited Lord & Taylor's as well, and then had an exquisite lunch at DuBarry's on Newbury. There are so few good French restaurants left to us, given all that yuppie nonsense."

"Do you recall when you finished lunch?"

"Oh, I had no need to look at my watch, but I went from there to Shreve, Crump & Low on Boylston. One must always stop at Shreve's, even with the financial . . . embarrassments of their recent past."

"When did you see Mr. Concannon's son?"

"Coming out of Shreve's. I distinctly remember looking at my watch, because I wanted to be sure to make the two forty-

two from North Station. Any later than that, and it becomes nearly impossible to obtain a decent seat for reading."

"And what time was it?"

"What . . . ? Oh, when I looked at my watch? Two twenty-three exactly. I saw the Concannon boy halfway up the block. He approached this . . . urchin, I suppose would be the polite phrase, though I was a bit more direct in my note. I didn't see any money change hands, but from the way the other boy was dressed, it was quite obvious what the purpose of the transaction was."

"You're sure it was Kevin?"

"Kevin? Is that his name? I met him only the once at the Friends' breakfast, but I'm certain it was he."

"Miss Poole, you said you were half a block away."

"Yes, but he is quite distinctive, you know."

"Distinctive?"

"Yes. His . . . tic I suppose you might call it. Or perhaps it's more like a . . . flinch?"

Poole flicked her head to the right, mimicking a punch-drunk boxer. I thought about Kevin Concannon's anxious smile for the photographer, the boy maybe concerned about moving involuntarily at the wrong moment.

I said, "Anything else?"

"Well, I watched them walk toward me and around the block to an alley. One might say a 'convenient' alley. Obviously, I did not remain any longer than that."

"Well, I appreciate your time, Miss Poole."

"I just do hope your Mr. Concannon does the responsible thing."

"I'm sorry?"

"Withdraw from the race before a scandal like this smears him forever."

The view from her hillside isn't like the ones Patrizzi and Poole enjoy. There's only the green of the lawn gone brownish from night frosts and the engine noises from commercial boats coming into Boston Harbor. The roses I laid diagonally to her headstone riffled in the breeze off the water.

*Roses. What's the occasion?*

"A case, Beth. One I feel a little guilty taking."

*Why?*

I explained it to her.

*Sad that the father can't talk outright to his son.*

Beth and I had never had any kids. Never wanted them, really, but I knew what she meant. "Well, maybe this'll be a step in the right direction."

*I hope so, but don't let it get you down if it's not.*

As I nodded, the wind came up a tad stronger, forcing me to realign the flowers so the blooms wouldn't be blown off the stems.

**N**orth Station is a quirky kind of place. It's located in the rear end of Boston Garden, where Orr used to skate and Bird used to shoot. On a game night, it's a zoo, fourteen thousand people jamming up the ramps to find their seats. But on a Wednesday afternoon in October, the station is a quiet place of suburban shoppers waiting for irregular trains, homeless people waiting to be roused, and tourists from countries where train travel is a more accepted way of sight-seeing.

Sitting on a scarred wooden bench, I checked the schedule in my right hand. The train that left Boston Harbor half an hour after Kevin Concannon got out of school would be arriving in about ten minutes. I was decked out in a ski sweater, khaki slacks, and running shoes as walking shoes. I also had a 35-millimeter camera, an unfolded map of Boston, and the stupidest hat I could find. The hat was a baseball cap, the crown over its bill sporting a cartoon lobster wearing a bib.



Since I'd have to have a camera around my neck, I decided the cap would help me blend in as a tourist because nobody in Boston has ever seen anyone from Boston with a lobster-anything on them.

The Beacon Harbor train arrived, and I spotted Kevin Concannon right away. He had a gangly, rolling gait, and the head flicked to the right erratically just the way Miss Poole had demonstrated. He wore pressed wool trousers and a lamb's wool sweater himself, no hat stupid or otherwise.

Concannon passed my bench. I waited ten strides, then rose and started after him. Outside the station, he crossed Causeway Street and hopped a Green Line trolley like he'd done it all his life.

I got on the next car and edged my way to the front of it, watching Kevin through the windshield as both trolleys jounced up and down on the rails. He stayed on past Park Street station, not getting off until Arlington. I followed him up the stairs to the first block of Boylston Street.

It didn't take long.

Concannon made eye contact with a scraggly kid who might have been twenty trying very hard to look sixteen. He wore a bandanna around his neck and tight hiking shorts on a day

way too cold for them. The kid smiled at Kevin, talked and joshed a little with him, then inclined his head toward the corner. I snapped off three shots of the boys before they turned and began walking. I got to the head of the alley just as they were choosing a dumpster to go behind. I took two more shots and kept walking past the alley.

Twenty minutes later the kid with the bandanna came out, Concannon trailing him by a minute. Kevin walked back to Boylston, then crossed it, taking an outside table at Au Bon Pain and having a pastry and a Styrofoam cup of something that steamed into the fall air.

After about fifteen minutes, a boy walking past the tables lingered a little. This one wore a turquoise body shirt and studded black jeans over cowboy boots, doing his lingering to hitch up one of the boots. Concannon left his table and joined him, the two of them making their way to the same alley. I took basically the same establishing shots again.

This time it was twenty-five minutes, but Kevin came out first, checking his watch and starting to hoof it a little. He flagged a cab, and the taxi took off down Boylston, making the turn at Charles toward North Station and, I guessed, home.

On Thursday morning, Riley Concannon and Nona Shapiro gave me the impression I was their first priority conference of the day. I hoped so.

I laid the manila envelope on the cluttered desk. Concannon's hands twitched, like they didn't really want to open it.

Shapiro said, "Bad?"

"About what Miss Poole described. Two different hustlers within the span of an hour."

Concannon said, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph."

Shapiro's eyes bored into me. "You can trust the place that developed these?"

"Completely."

She nodded. "Look, John, I know this hasn't been easy for you, either. I thank you for making it a little easier for us."

"Can I see you outside for a minute?"

Shapiro glanced over at Concannon, who was still just staring at the manila envelope. "Okay, but just a minute."

The corridor beyond the six-paneled door was empty, the volunteers, even Doris, not yet on the job. Shapiro closed the door gently behind her. "If it's the money—"

"What we agreed to is fine. And will be fine. This isn't a shakedown, just a suggestion."

"What is it?"

"Before Riley pulls the plug

on the campaign, be sure he talks to Kevin first."

"That's kind of his business as the boy's parent, don't you think?"

"I think that if Kevin hears the plug got pulled before he and Riley work things out, a lot more'll be lost than a seat in the Massachusetts senate."

Shapiro pursed her lips. "Thank you, John. Thank you for caring."

I'm not particularly political, but I found myself scanning the Metro section of the *Globe* each day, watching to see what would happen to Concannon's campaign. It took almost a week, till the following Monday, but the story made the front page. I felt my stomach turning as I read the headline.

It said, "CANDIDATE WITHDRAWS IN SHOCK OVER DEATH OF SON." The article reported that the boy fell from a rocky promontory near Olde Marsh Lane in Beacon Harbor. I pictured it from my visit to Miss Poole's cottage. The last paragraph told me that the candidate was withdrawing from the race to mourn the loss, the family expected to be in seclusion for several days.

That much was understandable. The part that wasn't included the photographs and the captions underneath them.

One photo showed a stern-looking man with cotton balls of gray gracing his temples. The caption read, "Thomas Whiting." The other shot showed the boy I'd followed and photographed. It wasn't the yearbook club display, but there was no mistaking the anxious smile.

The caption under him read, "David Whiting."

I tried out my voice to make sure it was working, then picked up the telephone.

"Police, Patrizzi."

"This is John Cuddy calling."

"Cuddy! Look, ordinarily I'd be happy to kibitz a while, but we had kind of a tragedy here yesterday, you know what I'm saying?"

"I read about it. The politician's son?"

"Yeah."

"Tough thing."

"Maybe tougher than you think."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know is it ever gonna come out, but it does, you didn't hear it from me first, right?"

"Right."

"Okay." Patrizzi lowered his voice a little. "We got a maybe eyewitness."

"A 'maybe' eyewitness?"

"Yeah. Woman driving her kid to the sitter's, using that

part of the harbor road that winds around the bluff. She says she only got a little glimpse like of the Whiting boy, but she's pretty sure he didn't fall."

"No?"

"God's truth. She says he jumped."

"Miss Poole?"

"Yes?"

"Miss Poole, this is John Francis calling. We spoke last week at your cottage."

"Oh my word, yes. I must say, I feel just terrible about this."

"We all do."

"I just hope my confusing which boy was which at the Friends breakfast didn't have anything to do with . . . well, to do with what happened."

"I'm sure it didn't, Miss Poole."

"Well, I'm certainly relieved to hear that."

"I do have a question I forgot to ask you, though."

"Another question?"

"Yes. Just to round out my report."

"What is it?"

I told her, and she told me.

I hung back at campaign headquarters, catching the tail end of the press conference with a couple of dozen rubbernecks packed just in-

side the door. The television kliegs made everything seem hot and close, Riley Concannon in what I took to be his trademark tie-tugged-down, sleeves-rolled-up posture behind the impromptu podium, Nona Shapiro just out of camera range on the right, surveying the crowd, not noticing me. Doris and her burly friend stood respectfully in a klatch of volunteers on the other side of the podium. The candidate managed to twist the last question into seeming to fit the perfect, sound-bite answer he gave that had everybody in the room nodding.

After Concannon and Shapiro repaired to the rear corridor, I waited until the camera crews had broken down and the print reporters had rewound and listened to their audiotapes. Then I sidled through the waning crowd without Doris or her friend's seeing me.

When I got to the six-paneled door, I didn't bother knocking. Shapiro and Concannon were just breaking a hug in front of his desk. Not passionate, just the sort of spontaneity you jump to when the home team comes from behind to score the winning touchdown.

I said, "A little early to be celebrating, don't you think?"

Shapiro recovered while Concannon's mouth was still open.

"John. I was hoping you'd be by."

"I doubt it, Nona, I really do."

Concannon started to say something, but Shapiro put her palm on his chest, and he stopped.

I said, "Good advice, Nona. Hear what I've got first, right?"

Shapiro said, "Would you like to sit down?"

"Thanks, no. I'm not sure I trust even the furniture in this room."

Concannon said, "Now just a—"

"Can it, you sanctimonious son of a bitch. You get me up here, show me Miss Poole's letter and that club photo—"

Shapiro rode over me. "We realized what happened there, John. You see, as you were looking at it, Riley said Kevin was the boy on the far right, but he was thinking *his*—Riley's—right, not yours."

"Nice try, but I'm afraid it just doesn't wash."

Concannon said, "It was an understandable mistake. I was upset, concerned about Kevin."

"When you first got Poole's letter, sure. But after Nona here made her ever-so-obtuse phone call to the woman, you realized exactly what had fallen into your lap."

Shapiro said, "I don't know what you're—"

"On the telephone, Nona. Miss Poole tells me that she mentioned to you about 'Kevin's' tic or flinch or whatever the poor Whiting boy had."

Concannon said, "You weren't supposed to see Poole. We told you—"

"So after that call, Riley, you and Nona knew it was Whiting's son Miss Poole saw in Boston, and you had to figure just what to do with it. Only it had to be obtuse, like Nona's phone call. A setup that preserved deniability, which is what you're doing now. That's where I came in. Right, Nona?"

Shapiro crossed her arms and rested her rump on the desk. "It's your pipedream, John. You tell it."

"More than a pipedream, Nona. You got me to acknowledge the confidentiality statute to you, keeping me from going to anybody after you or Riley or more likely some go-between gave Thomas Whiting those photos I took. How did you phrase it, a 'kindness'? Did your message read something like, 'Tom, despite our respective positions on the issues, the enclosed is something I think any parent deserves to know?'"

Concannon began to speak again, but Shapiro said, "He can't do anything with this, Riley. Don't you see it? That's

why he's here ragging us. Cuddy tells anybody about this, about what he even thinks we did, and he loses his license for violating a client's confidence."

I said, "Did you even think about what a candidate who's as four-square on 'family values' as Whiting would do? How he'd broach it to his son? What the kid might do after that?"

Concannon got resolute. "I think we've said all we're going to say, Cuddy."

"Not quite, Riley."

He stared at me, but I addressed Shapiro. "Here's the new program, Nona. I'm so overcome by grief that I can't sleep. I go to Whiting, apologize to him and—"

Shapiro said, "We'd have your license in an—"

"Interrupt me again, and I'll belt you." It seemed to sink in. "I'm guessing the board that registers me would understand. Guilt and grief are strong emotions, Nona. They make you do impulsive things. Like withdraw from the race."

Neither said anything.

I held up my hand, index and middle fingers extended. "Your choices are two. Number one, you can withdraw now, I don't talk to anybody, and nobody goes after my license. You don't get sued by Whiting's family and so tarred from the litigation you never run for anything

again. Number two, you can stonewall it, have me go to Whiting while you come after my license. His lawyers will hound you, and Whiting or any warm, breathing body the Republicans put up will blow you away at the polls. Number one or number two, but either way, you're out of this race."

Concannon said, "Time. You have to give us—"

"Tomorrow morning, boyo."

Shapiro said, "Tomor—"

"Tomorrow morning, Nona. I don't hear a bulletin about Riley pulling out by then, my grief and guilt will compel me to follow number two."

Concannon said, "But that doesn't give us a chance to—"

"What? Put my new program through the old 'spin-a-rama'? You're right, folks, it doesn't."

I managed not to slam the six-panel, but I found the optimism in the boiler room so thick I nearly gagged walking to my car.

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FICTION

# Uncle Grover's Last Will and Test

by O. S. Flanagan

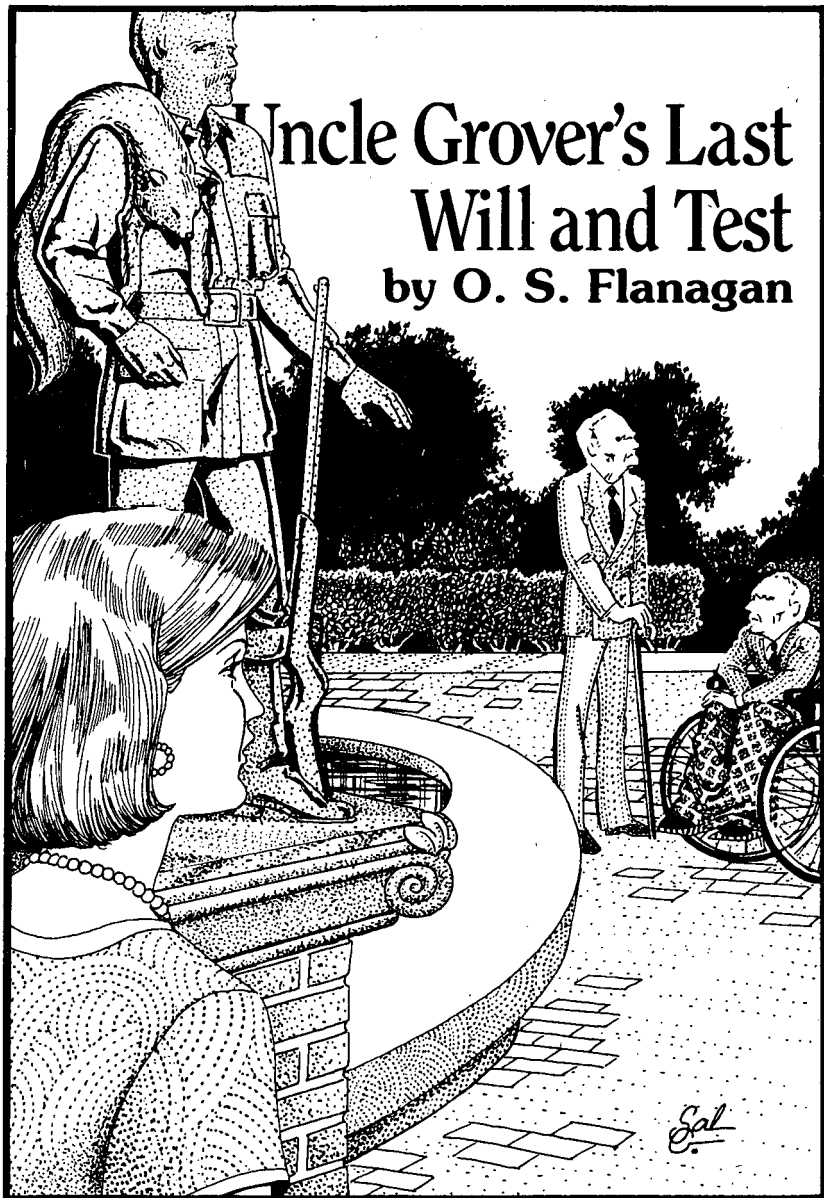


Illustration by Sallie Gregory

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**I**n an infrequent humorous moment my ex-husband said that between the hours of midnight and sunrise I could make Rip Van Winkle look like a chronic insomniac. Assuming he was correct and considering that I was on a six A.M. flight to Savannah, it was no wonder that I felt meaner than a snake. Or maybe the fact that I had less than six hours to make or break the financial well-being of a sweet old lady had something to do with my foul demeanor. And if I failed, not only would I hurt her but the majority of our future clientele could hear all about it. All that, a pending root canal, and an IRS audit made it hard to keep a happy face.

I am the “and Associate” in Alma Adams and Associate. I know the firm sounds like we specialize in picking out flowered upholstery for wicker verandah furniture. Instead we handle very private inquiries. My Aunt Alma and I operate an investigative firm that specializes in delicate matters, many for the silver-haired dowagers of Atlanta who attended Agnes Scott Women’s College with Alma and for their friends. As Alma once told me, “Honey, it’s easier for these old biddies to display their dirty lingerie to an old school friend

than to a stranger. And for some reason that I don’t understand, they think we charge less.”

Alma has been in this business for years. The story of how she got started is a mystery that even I don’t know. She said someday she’d tell me. Four years ago Alma was running her one-person business out of a nice little two-office suite in the Flat Iron Building on Peachtree Street in downtown Atlanta. I suddenly needed a career after my divorce, and Alma took me on as an apprentice. I hope that someday I can carry my own weight and truly earn the generous salary I receive. Last year Alma and I decided that the fiscal concerns of rent and parking outweighed the prestige of a downtown office and we moved just north of Midtown, a business district at Tenth Street and Peachtree and an area that only a few years ago was the home of an extensive hippie community. We found a modest suite on the second floor of a remodeled Victorian house that is convenient to both of us. Our landlords are a group of unique architects who occupy the ground floor. Alma has a theory that they woke up in that house sometime in 1971 with no idea how they got there, trimmed their hair and beards a little, and

went into business. They're a fun bunch if you don't need conversation that includes long sentences or very talented avant-garde architects. A pleasant amenity is that their refrigerator is always full of wine they gladly share. Since our clients would shudder, or worse, at the thought of coming to our office, the firm's surroundings need please only Alma and me. We moved Alma's extensive collection of books, something the Library of Congress would probably drool over, to her home. When Alma's husband George's arthritis is acting up, he sometimes has to use a wheelchair, and being our reference source picks up his spirits.

I had met Alma late the afternoon before at the modest but impeccably situated home (a mere two blocks from the Governor's Mansion) of Leona Beaumont Stafford. Our client was a small, dainty, blue-haired woman in her early seventies who gave up some pretty vicious weeding in her flowerbed to lead us inside.

When we were seated in a sunroom replete with bric-a-brac, Leona asked, "Wouldn't you ladies like a little something cool to drink while we talk?"

Alma acquiesced, and the diminutive dowager tottered off toward the back of the house. After our hostess had been gone awhile, I joined Alma, who was studying the titles of a collection of leatherbound books above the white brick fireplace. "I got a notice from the IRS," I said. "They want to audit my returns for the last three years." Alma nodded her condolences. "I'm not worried except for the last year that's a joint return. No telling what Dumbo deducted as a business expense."

I took down a book and thumbed through it. "Maybe she's having trouble finding the tea bags or the crumpets."

Alma said dryly, "You know a lot about older people, don't you, Callie?"

Minutes later Leona returned with a silver tray laden with huge goblets of frozen margaritas. She quickly drained half her glass and then talked while we sipped. I don't know how anyone, much less someone's grandmother, slugs down cold tequila without feeling like their skull is going to explode. What a woman!

"Even though my Uncle Grover was retired, he still occasionally published a score or two," Leona told us. "He wrote only the music. Never the words. For the last few years

he enjoyed reading mysteries, solving crossword puzzles, and, of course, studying the trophic interrelationships of our ecosystem. His executor had this delivered to me this morning."

I looked up from my notes to ask for more details about Grover and his hobbies, but Leona was at a nearby desk, removing something from a drawer. Her tiny, blue-veined, bejeweled hand held out a large manila envelope. I took it and removed a single sheet of paper.

*Leona, my dear little girl,  
you're two in this little fun,  
but in my heart, I hope you  
knew  
you were always number  
one.*

*You have only a little  
while  
to find the hidden money  
but I know it's enough  
for my smart little Bunny.*

I understood why Uncle Grover only wrote the music for his compositions. A poet he wasn't. I recognized the well-known composer's pen name at the bottom and immediately linked it with several movie and Broadway show scores.

"Bunny?" I asked almost apologetically.

"I was born on Easter Sunday." She smiled slyly. "Twenty-five years ago. Maybe a few more."

I liked Leona more every minute.

Leona finished her drink in one large gulp before she continued, "The attorney said Uncle Grover left a bequest that's hidden on his plantation near Savannah. My brothers also received notes, and we have three hours starting tomorrow morning at nine to search for whatever was left to us. Uncle Grover was always such a kiddier. Always dreaming up mind games and word tests to keep us sharp. My brothers were fourteen and I was eight when our parents died. Even though Uncle was a bachelor, he took us in. I loved him so, but I knew he always liked my brothers better. They're so smart. And handsome. Unfortunately I haven't seen or talked to them in a very long time. They're doctors. Probably very busy. They can't possibly need any money. And I'm sure that whatever they find they'd gladly give to me. But I'd rather not have to ask. And I'd be particularly proud to be represented by the person who finds the bequest. As a small tribute to Uncle Grover's memory. Then, of course, if my brothers want me to, I'll share

with them. Same as they would with me."

Alma slid the sheet of paper back into its envelope and handed it back to me. "Callie can catch an early flight tomorrow and be there at nine. Leona, do you have any ideas about where the inheritance could be hidden?"

"No, dear. That's why I'm hiring you. That and the fact that if I sent my son Chipper I'm afraid he wouldn't find it. He's a nice son, a good banker, but confidentially," Leona lowered her voice and leaned toward us (I was pretty sure no one else was in the house), "he may not be overly bright. I feel I must tell him that I've hired you, but if we don't succeed, he'll probably bad-mouth y'all at the bank and at Peachwood Country Club. He's something of a, what do you call it, chauvinist. And a gossip.

"But no matter how little the gift is, I need it desperately. My dead husband Terrence, you remember him, don't you, Alma, invested all our savings in his pension trust, and now it's declared bankruptcy. Too many real estate investments, I think. I could end up being a purse lady."

I opened my mouth to tell her that the term was bag lady, but Alma surreptitiously pinched my leg and I shut up. Thank

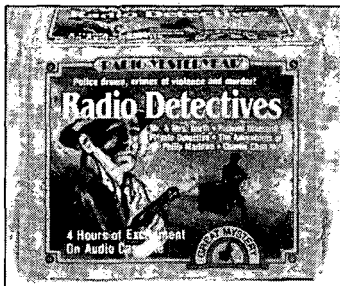
God Alma was there. I'd have hated myself later if I'd insulted Leona. It wasn't her fault I was feeling bitchy because of the IRS.

I stopped my rental car in the driveway of Beaumont Plantation at eight fifty and rang the buzzer. After I identified myself to some remote servant via a radio, the tall wrought-iron gates swept open, and I drove down a long winding avenue banked on both sides with huge pink and white azaleas that were occasionally dotted with red or lavender rhododendrons. The house was a replica of some large Italian villa. A bell tower capped the center of the third story.

After presenting my letter of introduction to a humorless executor/attorney, who made no attempt to hide his scorn for his deceased client's plan, I was told that I could join the gentlemen in the garden to begin our search.

An elderly manservant led me to the rear of the first floor. I found myself on a terrace above a large formal garden. A long flight of steps led down to a round fountain guarded by a bronze statue of a hunter with a rifle propped on one arm and a dead fox slung over his shoulder. On the far side of the foun-

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tain were two whitehaired men. One was standing with ramrod straightness despite his need to lean on a tall cane, while the other man was confined to a motorized wheelchair, his legs covered with a knitted afghan.

I introduced myself. The standing man offered his hand. "I'm Clifford Beaumont. This is my twin brother Willard. I thought sure Leona would send that idiot son of hers, Clipper, or whatever they call him. But I guess you'll do. Let me see Uncle Grover's letter to Leona. We don't have long. The ambulance chaser says that at noon this place, and everything on and in it, belongs to the Savannah Historical Society."

Willard wheeled over to me with astonishing speed. "Give us the note, honey. Then you can read ours."

Good grief! No girl over age five falls for the old "you show me yours and I'll show you mine" line.

"I don't think so. But I might be agreeable to a simultaneous swap."

The men stared at each other and then at me before Clifford reluctantly held out two sheets resembling the letter Leona had received. I offered mine, and the papers were exchanged. I scanned the other two.

The first one was even less lyrical than the tripe sent to Leona:

*Willard, you are something of a worm  
but number one in this game.  
I would leave you out entirely  
but won't since you share my name.*

The second was no better:

*Clifford, you old stuffed shirt,  
someone must be three.  
You were always a scheming fox  
even against good old me.*

Both discourses had a modified version of the same second paragraph Leona had received:

*You have a little while  
to locate the hidden treasure,  
but if by you it is found  
may it bring you little pleasure.*

By the way, did I mention that I wrote my own poem on the airplane? That's what I gave to the Brothers Beaumont. It was almost as awful as Uncle Grover's opus, but very different.

I looked up to find that Clifford was pointing his cane at me. From the tip protruded a knife blade that he had evidently activated by pressure on the handle.

"You can go now, sugar. My brother and I can't afford to share this inheritance with our nitwit sister. Unfortunately we made too many bad investments, mostly in egg and pork futures right before cholesterol became so popular. Tell Tripper he'll have to take care of his mother himself."

Great! And did Willard have heat seeking missiles installed in his wheelchair? No, of course not. Instead he had pulled a revolver from under his lap blanket. I should have known it was too warm for that wool thing. The gun was also aimed at me.

I couldn't bring myself to rush an old man, not even a threatening one. Instead I made a dash for the statue of the hunter. I knelt behind the base until I had my bearings, and then I ran in a crouched position for the woods beyond the fountain.

I heard Willard instruct his brother, "Clifford, you find her and keep her busy while I search for the money."

I found myself on a manicured nature trail. I tiptoed deeper into the woods. The trail was dotted with cast-iron and

ceramic figures of small animals; beside a creek a tiny garden patch was planted with plaster vegetables. Wind chimes of various materials and shapes dangled from tree limbs. It was like something out of an animated Disney movie. I half expected Bambi and Thumper to peek out from behind the blooming mountain laurel. I could hear Clifford thudding and puffing behind me. I tiptoed off the path and hid behind some thick camellia bushes. When I was sure that my pursuer had passed me, I doubled back and spent the next two hours avoiding Heckle and Jekyll while wandering around Beaumont Acres. I found several pens with live animals including dogs, cats, rabbits, and larger livestock. A large fenced vegetable garden was turned and ready for planting.

The estate apparently comprised more than fifty acres of mostly wooded land. And Uncle Grover expected his elderly relatives to find his legacy in three hours or less? A search of the house alone could take days. I sat down on the barn stoop and stared out at the animals and flowers. I took out the poems again and studied them. Then I reread my notes from our interview with Leona. Suddenly I had a glimmer of an idea.



I retraced my steps to the house. I could hear the whine of Willard's wheelchair somewhere in front of the mansion. I sneaked silently into the house, and after peeking into several rooms I found a library overlooking the fountain and gardens. There were hundreds of books, either mystery novels or reference books on music. But I couldn't find a dictionary or an encyclopedia. I did find a telephone, and dialed our office in Atlanta. When no one answered, I tried Alma at home. She wasn't there, but George was a big help because he did have a dictionary handy.

George told me that Uncle Grover's hobby, the one after crossword puzzles and mysteries, was the study of the hierarchy of relationships between plants and animals as each in turn is consumed by another. The earth's food chain. When I hung up, I knew where to look for the inheritance.

I ran back down to the gardens and studied the statue of the hunter. In the poems the worm was first, the rabbit second, and the fox third. Rabbits, I assumed, ate worms, and I knew that foxes ate bunnies. Next in the cycle, it would seem, would be the hunter, the one who killed the fox. After a moment I was able to unscrew the bronze arm that propped up

the rifle; inside the hollow space was a packet of papers protected by a plastic bag.

Just then Clifford emerged from the woods and screamed to me, "Drop that, you thief!"

I heard the bell atop the house begin to peal midday as I jumped in my car. I also heard Clifford shout to his brother, "At least shoot her tires, you coward!" I don't know if he tried or not. I scooted through the iron gates just as they were closing.

Back in Atlanta I went directly from Hartsfield International Airport to Leona's house. I had fought the strong urge to read what was in the packet only by indulging in a few weak airline cocktails and reading the afternoon paper. I don't know why I was so well behaved. Normally my overactive curiosity doesn't allow me to have such lofty standards. Maybe it was that I liked Leona so much. You have to admire anyone who can drink tequila like that.

I called Alma on my car phone, and she met me at our client's home.

Leona read the letter that was in the package several times before handing it to Alma. I almost got eyestrain reading over her shoulder

while Leona sniffled in the background.

*Dearest Leona,*

*I've taken the liberty of addressing this letter to you because I have no doubt that you'll be the one to find it. I'm afraid that in the past you may have felt I put you behind your brothers in my affection and respect, and truly nothing could have been further from the truth. While I did think that son of yours is pretty much a loser (how he inherited all his character from those selfish brothers of yours is one of those unfortunate mysteries in life), I have always known that you were bright beyond words. I knew that you'd either find this yourself or would have the sense to choose someone who could do it for you. I didn't leave you Beaumont Plantation because I don't know what the state of the economy will be when I go, and this huge place could be more of a financial burden than a reward. So instead I've left you these ten unpublished musical scores that will hopefully sell for a price that will be adequate to take good care of you.*

*I love you very much.  
Uncle Grover*

Before leaving I told Leona that she should keep the entire gift because her brothers had said that they didn't want her to share the inheritance with them.

It was the truth! Well, exactly what they said was that they didn't want to share with her. But isn't that the same thing? Sorta? Anyway, who'd know? The old buzzards never call her.

As Alma and I walked to our cars, I stretched and yawned loudly, "God, am I tired! I'm going home, feeding Sam a big dinner that any golden retriever would be proud to call her own, and going to bed. I'll see you in a few days when this black mood passes."

Alma tucked Leona's generous check in her pocket before opening her car door. "I think you feel better already now that you've helped Leona. And I'll bet good money that you lied about her brothers' generosity. But never mind. You're not going to sleep. Do you own a formal gown? Something strapless perhaps?"

I glared at her through heavy eyelids. "Strapless? And what, pray tell, would defy gravity on my chest? Velcro, maybe?"

"Don't be so hard on yourself, dear. You have a very nice figure. And don't worry about Sam. George is feeling better, so he picked her up this afternoon. By now they're getting ready for a little night fishing, to be followed by a fried catfish dinner at our cabin. You and I must be at the Peachwood Country Club by eight. Wait till you hear what Juanita Wainsworth needs us to find before her daughter Wordsy makes her formal debut at ten o'clock tonight. And why! I remember my coming out party in the same club. What a fiasco.

Actually, what a waste of a good evening gown. But never mind. I'm sure that someone other than the caterer must benefit somehow from these snobfests. Go on home, Callie, and get dressed."

What the hell. I wasn't really all that tired anyway. And I love to think that Alma needs me.

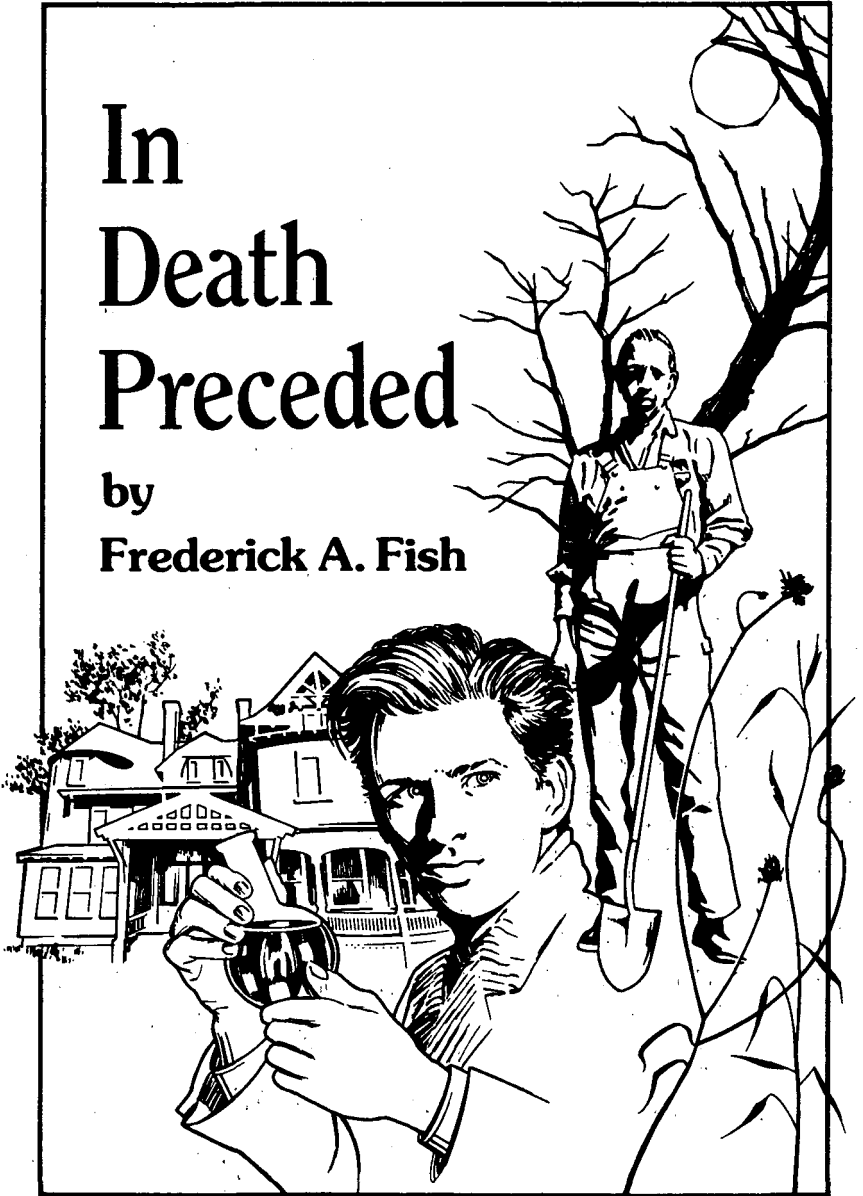
Some folks may frown on working for relatives, but in the case of Alma Adams and Associate, nepotism is working out just fine.

The girl's name is Wordsy Wainsworth? Oh, please!

FICTION

# In Death Preceded

by  
**Frederick A. Fish**



*Illustration by Gary Maria*

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Old Mrs. Taylor was the sort of woman who, on her birthday, secured party hats to the heads of her many dogs, seated them in the dining room, and served them all cake.

She had other eccentricities as well. On Sundays she would take her weekly drive through the streets of Bensonville in her ancient black Studebaker, the gloves of her long dead husband on the seat beside her. She wore thirty-year-old hats that were enormous and decorated to absurdity. She was known to knit new sweaters for her dogs every fall. She was old, and had lived alone for twenty years with only her dogs for company, and since she was wealthy, she was not considered crazy by the residents of Bensonville but merely eccentric.

One Friday in May, in the gloom of the early twilight, Mrs. Taylor sat rocking on the sun porch. She had been there all afternoon, brooding, searching for an end to her troubles. Now she had set her course. She would not countenance such injustice. She had decided to be stubborn.

When the stubbornness came upon Mrs. Taylor, she could be as unyielding as death itself.

She struggled out of the bentwood rocker, left the sun porch, and proceeded across the lawn, slowly and with great purpose. She was thinking deeply, and as she strolled along the gardens and under the elms, she took no notice of the early evening fireflies, the scent of the lilacs, the chatter of squirrels. She passed the kennel, a full acre under fence, and made loving noises at her remaining four dogs, who wagged and wiggled furiously in response. The tool shed was at the rear of the estate at the edge of the wooded ravine. Mrs. Taylor planted herself with deliberation in front of the open door.

A blue alcohol flame lit the interior of the shed. The flame was licking at the base of a laboratory flask that was packed with solvent and beechnuts. Vapors were passing out of the flask, through a glasswork apparatus of enormous complexity, to condense in an old shot glass. The boy who had assembled the apparatus was peering closely to count the drops of condensate; the handyman was there, too, watching over the boy's shoulder, fascinated.

Startled at the sudden appearance of Mrs. Taylor, who rarely ventured as far as the shed, the boy and the handyman stared in puzzled silence.

"Shen is dead, young man," pronounced Mrs. Taylor. "This shed will be padlocked by Monday if you do not find out for me who killed him."

The boy blinked in surprise. "But . . . nobody killed your dog, Mrs. Taylor. He had a heart attack or something. He died in his sleep."

Karl, the handyman, slipped past Mrs. Taylor and out the door. He hurried away as if he had suddenly remembered pressing business elsewhere.

Mrs. Taylor punctuated her statements with sharp raps of her cane on the floor. "I am highly familiar with death, young man. It is an old friend of mine. If Shen were ready to die, I would have known it. His was not a natural passing. He was poisoned by someone in the neighborhood, probably those trashy Brady boys. In any case, I want you to find out by whom. By Monday, young man! Or lock this shed I shall!"

And she was gone.

As the gloom of evening deepened, Alex, head down and lost in thought, scuffed his Nikes through the dust of the path that led through the wooded ravine toward home.

He had walked this path every day since last spring. At that time his lab had been in the basement of his home. That was before what his mother called "Alex's Disaster" had occurred.

When Alex was twelve, he had received a deluxe chemistry set as a present from his father, and he fell immediately, deeply, irrevocably in love with science. For the next three years he spent every cent he earned on test tubes, chemicals, lab books, beakers, and flasks. As Alex grew older and his life grew more complicated—Alex's parents divorced, he endured puberty, the friends of his earlier years discovered team sports and girls and drifted out of his life—Alex found his basement lab to be the only place he felt happy, the only place he felt secure. He spent increasingly more of his free time working in the lab, assembling ever more complicated equipment, running more complex experiments. It was the only activity he truly enjoyed.

One evening he was puzzling over the chemistry of pyrotechnics and trying to learn the secret of making bright blue fireworks (other colors are common, but very rarely are firework skybursts blue) when a spark of powdered magnesium jumped out of the spoon he was holding over an alcohol flame and landed in the open magnesium container, igniting a quarter pound of the stuff. The resulting fire was magnificent, burning with a blinding, brilliant whiteness, consuming the cardboard container and igniting the old

wooden workbench on which it sat. Alex knew enough not to throw water on burning magnesium, as this would cause an explosion, so he was patiently waiting with a bucket of water for the magnesium to burn itself out so he could extinguish the workbench when his mother appeared on the basement stairs, screamed at the sight, and ran to dial 911.

When the firemen left, his mother banished Alex's experiments from the house forever, with no hope of reprieve.

After that unfairness Alex didn't speak to his mother for weeks. He avoided home and spent all his free time collecting insects in the ravine and on the wooded slope behind old Mrs. Taylor's estate.

Alex had been acquainted with Mrs. Taylor for several years. She tolerated the local kids, as she lived alone and liked to hear the noise of people other than her handyman, and Alex's explorations of the ravine and woods often led him onto her property. For that reason, when his mother invited many of the neighbors to a party to celebrate Alex's eighth grade graduation, she felt obligated to invite Mrs. Taylor, never dreaming that a woman of Mrs. Taylor's wealth would attend. Alex was very happy that she did; she surprised him with an expensive magnesium-alloy frame touring bicycle as a present. Later his mother remarked that giving a casual acquaintance such an expensive gift proved the old woman was crazy. After that when, during his explorations through the ravine and woods, Alex noticed Mrs. Taylor in her yard, walking in her garden, or speaking to her dogs in the kennel, he would stop and chat, which had the effect of impressing upon her what a polite and pleasant young man he was.

On this occasion Alex had spoken to Mrs. Taylor of his despair at having lost the use of his lab, and she invited him to set up a lab in the old, unused tool shed on the corner of her estate. So Alex had made trip after trip along the ravine path, carrying his chemicals, test tubes, beakers, and boxes of lab equipment. He found the shed to make a much better lab than his basement, being more spacious, better lighted, and more fully equipped with benches and shelves. Every day since then he had enjoyed exploring his scientific worlds in the quiet of Mrs. Taylor's shed.

And now, as he trudged along the path leading home, Alex was brooding over the probable loss of his lab for the second time. He kicked hard at a stick that lay on the path. This was the best lab setup he had ever had; he wasn't going to give it up without a fight.



The path passed from the manicured woods of the Taylor estate into the tangled and swampy thicket of the deepest part of the ravine. Here it was darker. Near the creek some oaks and maples had been choked out in previous years by the spring floods; now dead and bare of bark, the white trunks stretched leafless to the sky, or lay crisscrossed on the ground like the skeletons of soldiers fallen in battle, unburied. Alex walked faster, over the oak trunk that bridged the creek, up his side of the ravine, through his back yard to home.

The beatup Ford truck that belonged to his mother's boyfriend was parked in the gravel driveway. Alex grunted in disgust and walked in the back door of the house.

His mom and Dick lay like nested spoons on the living room couch, watching Vanna turn letters on the TV. They didn't get up when he entered. His mom said, "Did you get some supper? Want me to make you something?"

"No. I'll do it myself."

"I could open up a can of that beef stew."

"I'll do it *myself*."

"Hey, kid," Dick said with his usual insipid grin. "I've got tickets for the Cubs on Saturday. Want to drive in with us?"

"No, thanks. Baseball's not really my thing. . . ." Alex escaped quickly to his room before his mom could insist. Muffled laughter followed him from the living room. He shut his door firmly and threw himself on his bed.

He stared at the phosphorescent stars glued in constellations on his ceiling, more content now that he was in one of his favorite thinking spots. Maybe poison was the key, he thought. Maybe he could convince Mrs. Taylor that Shen would have died differently if he'd been poisoned. He'd have been sick, or gone into convulsions, instead of dying quietly in his sleep. Alex had once read a chemical safety manual and so knew something about the effects of poisons on people, but not on dogs.

He had to work at Dr. Fredericks' after school tomorrow, sweeping out the vet's office. He'd ask him about the effects of poisons on dogs.

Alex fished a book from under his bed, and buried himself and his troubles in *The Intelligent Man's Guide to the Physical Sciences*.

"Ever get any dogs here that've been poisoned?"

Dr. Fredericks was carefully shaving the belly of a sedated poodle that was to be spayed. He glanced over his surgical mask at Alex, who had finished sweeping and who now ought to have been leaving before the operation began.

"Sometimes. Antifreeze most often. People let it puddle when they work on their cars, and dogs come by and drink it. Tastes sweet to dogs." The vet finished with the clippers and moved the tray of surgical tools to within easy reach.

"Can I stay and watch this time? I'm thinking of going into medicine."

Dr. Fredericks looked up from his work and considered. At fifty, he was a confirmed bachelor with no son of his own. Alex was a good kid, obviously college bound. It had pleased Dr. Fredericks to have been able to offer Alex this job, since the kid was obviously in need of money. "Wash up and stand over there. Leave if you feel sick."

Alex grinned; he always did when Dr. Fredericks thought well of him. "Nothing interesting makes me sick. How can you tell if a dog's been poisoned?"

"Oh, illness, convulsion, respiratory and cardiac distress. It's usually pretty obvious."

"Are there any poisons that might make a dog just lie down and die, without all that?"

"Well, cyanide can be pretty sneaky. And there's lots of it around for dogs to get into. Old rat poisons, metal plating shops. Doesn't take much cyanide to kill a dog, or a person for that matter. Causes respiratory collapse in minutes." Dr. Fredericks began the familiar operation as he spoke.

"Gee, I'm surprised there's not much blood," Alex said.

"There's not much blood if you do this right," Dr. Fredericks said, continuing his work.

"I read cyanide could be detected pretty easily because it leaves an almond odor."

"No, I think that's a myth. It takes so little to do the job, there just isn't much to smell. Besides, only about half the people in the world can even sense that odor. People vary greatly in their ability to detect odors. I did quite a study of the sense of smell as a physiology research project in college. No, you have to determine cyanide poisoning by blood analysis or autopsy. Someone poison your dog?"

Alex explained about his problem with Mrs. Taylor.

Dr. Fredericks smiled behind his surgical mask about what Mrs. Taylor was doing this time. "Heck, I've examined Shen. He must have been fifteen years old. He just died of old age."

"Um . . . could you help me prove it?"

Dr. Fredericks looked puzzled for a minute, then said, "To do that we'd have to . . ." before his voice took a harder tone. "Look, are you saying in your judgment I should do an autopsy on a dog that's been dead and buried for a week just to satisfy an eccentric old lady?"

"Well—we might make her feel better if she knew he wasn't poisoned."

There was only the click of Dr. Fredericks' surgical instruments for a few moments. Then he said coldly, "Better not aggravate the old woman's delusions, Alex. I think you'd better go clean out the cat cages now."

Dr. Fredericks had spoken to him like a father to a particularly stupid teenager. Alex left the room, his ears glowing red with shame and embarrassment.

Alex rested his elbows on his knees, steadied the BB pistol with both hands, and fired. He was on the edge of the ravine near the shed that held his laboratory, plinking BB's at small green plastic army men that he had set up in shallow dirt trenches five feet away. This was a game he'd enjoyed playing since he was ten years old. Over the years the gun spring had grown so weak that the BB's took a distinct downward trajectory, but Alex felt he was too old to be spending his money on a new BB gun.

"That looks like fun. Can I try?" Karl asked in his thick Germanic accent. The handyman had walked up quietly, startling Alex. A lifetime of physical labor had left Karl tough and wiry in the way some workingmen become when they reach their early fifties. He spoke so little and walked so lightly in his workboots that he often startled people with his sudden appearance. He was carrying a shovel and a small block of polished marble. He set down his load, wiped his graying hair back from his narrow forehead.

Alex's ears grew red at having been caught at this kid's game. "Okay. You have to kneel down. Don't aim the barrel too far downward, and fire quickly after you cock it, or the BB will just roll out of the barrel with no force. Gun's pretty old, and the spring is weak."

Karl plinked three of the army men in three shots, barking a harsh laugh each time one of the men slapped the dirt.

Alex peered at the marble slab Karl had been carrying. It was a small and simple gravestone. *Shen*. "Does she always put up a gravestone?" he asked.

Karl handed back the pistol, then swigged from a pint of Jägermeister he pulled from the pocket of his overalls. "I've worked full time for Mrs. Taylor for four years now. Two dogs dead since I work here. Two gravestones. Must be about seven over there now."

"What I can't figure out is why Mrs. Taylor thinks someone would want to poison one of her dogs. Shen was pretty gentle. He never bit anyone, or even barked very much."

Karl shrugged. "If it had been poison, which it wasn't, I'd say pure meanness. People like to kill things sometimes. But I found the dog that morning. Died in its sleep. No poison."

"I've been thinking. A book I read on problem solving said the solution to a problem depends on how the problem's defined. I've been trying to prove Shen wasn't poisoned, and that's almost impossible without an autopsy. Maybe my real problem is to *prove to* Mrs. Taylor I've done my best and come up with nothing. Maybe then she'll let me keep my lab in the shed."

"Mrs. Taylor means exactly what she says," Karl said solemnly. "She always does exactly what she says she will do." He frowned, the thought that Mrs. Taylor might be anything less than consistent disturbing his Germanic sense of order. Then he hoisted the marble gravestone to his shoulder.

"I need to prove to her that I've done everything possible," Alex said. "I think I'm going to talk to the cops."

Karl shook his head. "Cops. I learned in the old country, never involve the authorities. They will only make your troubles three times worse." He walked away along the edge of the ravine toward the north corner of Mrs. Taylor's estate, to mark the dog's grave.

Alex walked slowly up the sidewalk leading to New Bedford High. The bass line of a rap song throbbed in the evening air, having escaped the confines of the gym. The Friday night dance was in full swing. Alex, who hated these mating rituals, grunted in disgust but continued up the sidewalk toward the school.

Officer Agee often worked security for high school events, and Alex had noticed that he seemed to like to talk to kids. At least kids were always hanging around him. It had always surprised

Alex that those who most often hung around the cop were the tough kids, those whom Alex figured would more than likely wind up in jail someday. Officer Agee seemed to genuinely enjoy their company, and Alex theorized there was some sort of symbiotic relationship between the cop and those whom he would someday arrest.

Tonight Officer Agee was leaning against the door jamb, checking the students for booze as they entered. Several of the tough kids were also hanging out, talking with the cop and hassling couples going to the dance. "If it ain't the King of the Geeks," one of them said as Alex approached.

Alex ignored the taunt, scratched his head nervously, wondered where to start. He searched, but there just was no small talk within him, so he went straight to the matter. "Officer Agee, you hear of anybody poisoning dogs around town?"

"I've seen a couple dogs walk into this dance, but none of 'em looked poisoned," the cop said, and grinned at the laughter of the kids who were hanging out.

"Real dogs. The four-legged kind," Alex said, persisting. "Dead from poison. Anything like that going on around town?"

"Why you asking? Your dog dead?"

"Well, not mine. You know Mrs. Taylor, lives in the big house on Elm?"

The cop laughed. "Old Lady Taylor? Talks to her dogs like people? Not that senile old bat again, yeah, she called us about her dog. I tell you, this job would be a lot easier if it wasn't for crazy old women like her. Callin' us all the time about the weirdest things. What, she got you runnin' around lookin' for who killed her old dog, damn thing died of old age? You a detective?" Agee pronounced it dee-tec-tive, bringing laughter from the other kids again.

Alex felt the redness creeping up his neck again. "Well, kind of, I guess. Did you investigate at all . . ."

"C'mon, kid, maybe we got a small town here, but we've still got too much to do to waste our time that way. We looked around the dog pen for three minutes, patted the old lady's hand, and left."

"Will you, uh, do an autopsy, you know, on the dog?"

"A *what*?" Agee's eyes goggled. "You watch too many late night episodes of *Quincy*? Nobody does autopsies on dogs." Agee stopped leaning against the door jamb, stood up and towered over Alex. "Christ, kid, I don't want you getting that old woman worked up

again, hear me? You keep that old woman thinking about that dog, she's going to call us again, and if she does that, I think I might blame you, get me? You might be mighty sorry, get me? Getting your driver's license soon, right? Want to keep it?"

Alex had begun walking stiffly away, sweating and scarlet with embarrassment. "Yeah, I understand you," he said.

"Bye, dee-tec-tive," one kid shouted, laughing.

It was unseasonably hot that Saturday afternoon, but a bit cooler near the creek where Alex sat on a tree trunk, waiting. A tree frog croaked mournfully nearby. The air was still and smelled of swamp and mud. The path by the creek was a highway for the local kids, and several had passed by in the last half hour. Finally Alex saw the two kids he was waiting for. The Brady brothers.

Steve Brady was in the lead. He was taller than Alex, with a wispy mustache. Andy Brady walked behind, swishing a stick through the tall grass. Both boys wore dirty jeans, and their T-shirts did little to hide their ropy muscles bred of farm work. They were from what Mrs. Taylor called a "white trash family" that had only been in town a couple of years, having moved to Bensonville after the family potato farm up north had failed.

Alex jumped off the tree trunk and stopped on the path, facing the oncoming Bradys.

Steve Brady stopped and frowned, sensing trouble. "You want something, skinny?"

"Mrs. Taylor says her dog was poisoned."

"What of it? Come on, Andy." Steve stepped off the path to walk around Alex.

"We wouldn't poison no dog," Andy said, holding his ground. "Killed a cat one time. Dug a hole and hit it with the shovel and buried it. Dad made me do it. Wouldn't poison no dog, though. Why you asking us?"

"You know anything about it?" Alex was shaking, knew his muscles to be overloaded with adrenaline, knew where this was leading but unable to stop.

"You saying we done it? Steve, he's saying we done it!"

Steve had come around behind Alex. Alex turned to keep from getting jumped from behind. He felt Andy yank the book out of his back pocket.

"Give me that back!" Alex shouted, starting for Andy.

"Hoo boy, look at this, the In-tell-gent Man's Guide. You don't look so in-tell-gent to me." Andy flipped the book sideways into the creek, where it skipped once and then began to float lazily away with the slight current.

"You crud! Did you poison Shen?"

Andy swung a roundhouse punch and clipped Alex on the point of the chin. "I'll whop the snot out of you for saying that," he said, and waded into Alex.

Alex staggered back from the blow, recovered, and swung for Andy's head but missed.

It was a standup boxing match, both boys slugging it out toe to toe. Alex threw right jabs and left crosses, the only punches he knew, landing them on his opponent's shoulders, elbows, sometimes only air. Andy blocked and weaved, letting Alex tire himself out, then exploded three quick punches to Alex's face. Alex found himself on his back, staring at the sun, the coppery taste of blood in his mouth.

"Short fight, skinny!" Andy Brady said, laughing.

"Leave him be, Andy," Steve Brady said. He'd taken no joy out of watching his brother beat up skinny Alex, but was content to see that his brand of rough justice had been carried out. "Can't go around saying we poisoned no dog. Only a real scumbucket would do that. C'mon, Andy." Steve led his brother away along the creek path.

Alex sat up, snuffled, dug a handkerchief out of his pocket to staunch the flow of blood from his nose. He looked around for his book, saw that it was still floating with the current. He watched in despair, out of ideas, as the book slowly soaked up water and sank to the bottom of the creek.

Alex left his house early the next morning. As he walked down the ravine, across the creek, and up the path toward Mrs. Taylor's estate, he mentally prepared himself to throw his fate on her mercy. Maybe she had changed her mind about tossing him out of her shed, Alex thought hopefully. Maybe she'd realized that nobody had poisoned her old dog.

Alex stepped out of the woods and onto the Taylor estate, and froze at the unexpected sight. An ambulance sat in the driveway with its rear doors wide open.

Alex ran to the house, reaching it just as two paramedics were bringing the stretcher out. The figure on it was covered completely



with a white sheet. Karl followed the stretcher out of the house, his work cap in his hands. He stopped beside Alex and put his arm around the boy's shoulder.

"She always had me come in the house, mornings, for a cup of coffee," Karl said. "Let myself in this morning, and found her."

Alex felt numb with the shock. "But what happened? She was fine yesterday."

Karl shook his head. "She was pretty old. Had a heart attack or something."

A heart attack. Or something. Alex felt himself grow even colder.

Alex said to the closest paramedic, "What about the, uh, autopsy?"

The paramedic finished sliding the stretcher into the ambulance, slammed the door. He turned to Alex, visibly deciding whether to satisfy this kid's curiosity. "No autopsy, kid. What's the point, woman this old, no next of kin to request it? Case like this, the coroner puts it down as a cardiac event and issues the certificate." The paramedic jumped in the ambulance and slammed the door. The vehicle glided slowly and quietly away, without benefit of warning lights or siren.

Alex and Karl stood side by side, watching as the ambulance turned the corner and disappeared. As the sound of the vehicle faded, Alex turned to face Karl. Their gazes locked; unspoken knowledge passed between them; questions were silently asked and answered.

Alex turned and bolted for home, fleeing like a rabbit from the hunter.

Alex sat on his roof in the windy chill of night, peering through the telescope that was propped on his knees. His telescope was not pointed at the winking stars. He watched Mrs. Taylor's estate for signs of movement or activity, but all was dark and silent.

His thoughts drifted back; to the disdain of Officer Agee, the stern disapproval of Dr. Fredericks, the indifference of his mother, the beating he'd taken from Andy Brady. He collapsed the telescope and tucked it in his pocket.

He would prove Karl's guilt himself.

He scrambled back in his bedroom window, grabbed his knapsack, and quietly padded down to the kitchen. He opened the knife drawer, took out an eight inch serrated blade, and tucked it in his knapsack. He unplugged the Waring blender. Into the knapsack it

went. He listened; no movement in the house, his mother was asleep. As he was slipping through the laundry room toward the back door, he noticed his BB pistol sitting on the clothes dryer. He paused, knowing it to be a feeble weapon, but then tucked it in his belt anyway.

Alex walked as quietly as he could, through the back yard and down the ravine. The full moon lit his way. He strained his senses, listening for anyone else moving through the night, but above the rustle of the wind through branches he could only hear the nearby moaning of bullfrogs and the calls of crickets. He crossed the creek; the dead trees near the bog stretched their branches upward like bones straining for new life. Alex hurried on.

He reached the edge of the north side of the Taylor estate, and continued until he reached the pet graveyard. The headstones reflected enough of the pale light of the moon that Alex could read the inscriptions. At the base of Shen's stone he dropped the knapsack, pulled out his spade, and began to dig.

Three feet down into the rich soil Alex struck canvas. He cleared around it, revealing the enshrouded shape of the dog. He threw the spade aside, grabbed the canvas, and wrestled the remains of the German shepherd out of the ground.

He knelt on the ground and unwrapped the canvas.

Shen was cold and stiff, and his hair was matted, but he had been protected by the canvas wrap and was little decayed. Alex took a few quick breaths to steel himself, then grabbed the knife and plunged it into the dog's gut. He quickly sawed an incision to lay open a U-shaped flap of skin. After a few moments' work, he had a large piece of the liver, which he dropped into the container of the Waring blender.

Alex flipped back the canvas to cover the remains of the dog, then trotted through the dark to his lab in the shed. He dropped the knapsack and knife in the corner and lit two candles for light, afraid to advertise his presence with the overhead lamp. He pulled a book from the shelf, *Qualitative Analysis*, and checked a reference table. Then he added some solvent to the blender, plugged it in, pushed the button marked "Liquefy."

When the purple mixture had the right consistency, he poured it into a glass flask, put in a different solvent, swirled the flask to blend the mixture, added three drops of a reagent he selected from his chemical shelf. The mixture turned a bright red. A positive indication of cyanide.

A soft metallic click sounded behind Alex. He whirled around, already knowing who had walked in quietly behind him.

Karl was leaning against the door jamb, blocking the only exit from the shed. The metallic click was the sound of Karl's opening his four inch lockback knife; he was using it to scrape dirt from under his fingernail.

Karl stuck the open knife in his belt, pulled from his pocket a pint of Jägermeister, and swallowed what was left. "She was just a crazy old woman," he said with an edge of drunkenness to his voice. "Nothing to feel bad about."

The odors of sweat and liquor and fear were thick in the laboratory shed.

"Remember the bike she gave you, your school party?" Karl said. "Cost hundreds of dollars, and she barely knew you then. Crazy old lady, had no idea of money. Bet she put you in her will. She liked you. Said she'd put me in. The will, you know. Crazy lady like that, no telling how much she put in for us."

Karl struggled in the dim candlelight to focus his eyes on Alex's work. He pointed with the knife at the chemical apparatus. "What's that tell you?"

Alex's answer was to bolt for the door. He collided with Karl, toppling him backwards, and dashed toward the woods at the edge of the ravine. As he plunged into the trees, he could hear Karl's footsteps pounding after him.

Alex darted down the ravine slope, avoiding the path and crashing through the underbrush, hoping he could force his way through the weeds and branches faster than the man behind him. It wasn't working; Karl was catching up, and by the time Alex reached the bog near the creek, he knew he wouldn't make it home before being caught.

Alex was among the dead trees now. He suddenly veered from his path, jumped up the trunk of a long dead ironwood, and clambered higher, as nimble as a raccoon. Karl jumped, trying to catch Alex's foot, but missed by inches. In moments, Alex was sitting on a broken branch thirty feet up the dead tree.

Alex bellowed for help. His cries were blown away in the stiff night wind, unheard in the distant houses.

Karl stood at the bottom of the tree, panting. "Why you running from old Karl? I thought we were friends."

"Where'd you get the cyanide, Karl?" Alex called down. "Did you put it in her tea?"

Karl grinned up at Alex. "Milk!" he shouted. Karl pushed the lockback blade to the left side of his belt and started to climb.

Alex bellowed for help again but knew it was useless. When Karl was halfway up, Alex braced himself to jump, hoping the fall wouldn't kill him. Then he felt the BB gun stuck in his belt. He drew and cocked it, knowing it to be a pathetic weapon. He pointed down at Karl, hesitated a moment, and pulled the trigger.

The BB rolled out of the barrel with no force and bounced harmlessly off Karl's forehead.

Karl reached up and grabbed Alex's foot. Alex quickly cocked the gun again, and this time fired downward with no hesitation.

The BB struck Karl in the right eye with a forceful splat, like the sound a stone makes when hurled into mud. Karl instinctively reached for his ruined eye, lost his grip on the tree, and fell heavily to the ground below.

Alex could barely see in the dim moonlight the form of Karl's body sprawled at the base of the tree. Several minutes passed, but Karl did not move, so Alex eased himself down from his perch. With a mixture of fascination and horror, he saw the stub of a thick, broken branch protruding through Karl's back. Karl had landed on a dead limb and been pierced through, like a specimen insect impaled on a pin.

Alex was sweeping the hair and nail clippings from the floor of the veterinary examination room while Dr. Fredericks examined the ears of an old bassett hound.

"I'd never seen an inquest before," Alex was saying. "It was pretty neat. The cops found an old box of rat poison in Mrs. Taylor's basement. They figure Karl experimented on the dog, to make sure the poison still worked, before he gave it to Mrs. Taylor."

Dr. Fredericks finished with the hound and flipped it a vitamin bone to chew. "Did you have to testify?"

"No. I think they were embarrassed to admit I had anything to do with proving poison was used. They had a pathologist testify."

"Did you hear about the will?" Dr. Fredericks asked. "Bensonville now has the richest humane society in the country."

"I guess Karl did it all for nothing. Do you have anything more for me to do tonight? I've got to finish my homework and clean my lab stuff out of Mrs. Taylor's shed."

"You're moving your lab?"

"Have to. The realtor tacked up a 'Sold' sign. I'd better get out before the new owner takes over."

"Why not ask me if you can stay?"

"You?"

"Well, I'm just renting this building. The Taylor place cost more than I should have spent, but I'm going to renovate it for my vet and boarding businesses, and I'll live on the top floors. But I haven't got any plans for the tool shed."

"Uhm . . . Dr. Fredericks, can I keep my lab in your shed?"

"Glad to have you. You'll be that much closer if you plan on working for me this summer. You do plan on working for me, right?"

"You bet!" Alex said.

"One thing, though," Dr. Fredericks said. "I'd like it if you painted that shed for me. I know that's a pretty big job. Think I should hire a new handyman to help you?"

"Gee, no thanks." Alex said. "I think I'll do it myself."

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Out of here. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

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FICTION

# A Clinical Interest in Murder

by Dick Stodghill



*Illustration by Steve Cavallo*

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If smiles were the reward for preparing an excellent dinner, Ivy Bauer's efforts had gone for naught. Her pork roast was succulent, the sauerkraut tasty and mild, yet dour faces rimmed the dining room table at the boardinghouse on Dudley Street.

Even the usually vivacious Kitty Bauer was a study in brown. Miss Ferrabee, prim and proper as ever, looked as though she had discovered something crawling in her salad. Jack Eddy ate mechanically, his mind somewhere off in the blue. One look at twelve-year-old Artie Bauer's black eye told how things had gone at school that day.

My own mood was no better. Covering the banner story of the day included talking to survivors of a young man who, the evening before, had jumped from the High Level Bridge that linked North Main Street with Cuyahoga Falls. He had been working too hard, I was told, and alone in his car, had just driven the eighteen hundred miles from the south of Texas to Akron in two days. He had gone out after dinner, telling his wife and son he was to going to visit his father, a prominent Akronite. Instead he had driven to the bridge, folded his overcoat, and climbed the railing. It was a

drop of one hundred eighty-eight feet into two feet of water.

The silent minutes crept by, interrupted only by an occasional cough and the rhythmic clinking of forks against plates. At last the spell was broken when Mr. Reimer, the retired druggist, cleared his throat and said, "Uh, has something happened that, uh, I am not aware of?"

The other diners turned to him with steely glares until Mabel Klosterman giggled for no reason whatsoever, then all eyes focused on her. Red-faced and beginning to perspire, she said, "When I was coming home a man got sick on the bus and threw up all over the woman in front of him."

"Really, Mabel!" said Miss Ferrabee. "I hardly think it's something anyone cares to hear about at mealtime."

Enough was enough. Looking to where Mrs. Bauer sat grim-faced at one end of the table, I risked a smile and said, "Swell supper tonight, Mrs. B. What's for dessert?"

Without bothering to glance my way she replied, "It's Thursday, isn't it? We have rice pudding on Thursday."

If so it was a new policy. I distinctly remembered enjoying her rhubarb pie a week earlier. Wisely, I chose to remain silent on the matter.

Later, while the Bauer boys, Paul and Artie, were clearing the table and Mrs. Bauer and Kitty were in the kitchen preparing to do the dishes, I followed Jack Eddy out to the front porch. It was a mild evening for mid-November. Tiny particles of black grit from the Goodyear plant a block away crunched underfoot. In recent weeks smoke had risen from only one of the three stacks towering above the factory, a visible reminder that 1937 was drawing to a close on the downside. The economists assured everyone the Depression was over, this was merely a recession. You could have fooled most of us.

"What's new, buddy?" Jack said absently. I recognized his mood and knew he wasn't interested in hearing about my day. As usual his thoughts were on his job as assistant manager at the Akron branch of Wellington's National Detective Agency.

I said, "Working on a tough case, huh?"

He searched his pocket for a cigarette, came up empty and reached for the pack of Spuds in my hand. "Why do you smoke these mentholated coffin nails?" he asked snappishly. "I hate 'em."

Not enough, I had noticed, to keep him from bumming one

several times a day. Rather than saying so I more or less repeated my question, "What's it all about?"

"What? Oh, you mean what I'm working on? Nothing special, just a few routine cases. I'm driving down to Buckeye Lake in the morning, friend. What to ride along?"

"I have to work, Jack. You know that."

His sandy hair, already thinning at the age of twenty-six, stirred in the evening breeze. "It's nothing urgent, nothing that won't keep till Saturday. You're off then, right?"

"Yes, but I'm meeting Sue Baney for lunch. After that we're going to take in a movie or something."

"Bring her along."

"Why are you going to Buckeye Lake, Jack? The park's closed for the season, isn't it?"

"The hotel's still open. I have to check a couple of things there, just verify a police report is all, then maybe we can swing over to Columbus for a good time."

"I don't think so, Jack. An amusement park this time of year is about as much fun as a case of mumps, and Columbus is just another Wapakoneta, only bigger."

He had his way, of course. In the seven months I had known him, I had learned that Jack

Eddy *always* had his way. Protesting was futile; he could work around any argument no matter how justified it might be. It irked me, this conviction that he would have come out the winner had the Lincoln-Douglas debates been three-way affairs. Still I invariably found myself giving in at the end.

Sue Baney had quickly agreed to postponing our date. Almost too quickly for my peace of mind. She had shopping to do, she said, and Saturday was her only free time for it. So it was that shortly before nine I found myself seated beside Jack Eddy as he headed his sleek Auburn sedan south toward Buckeye Lake. The crisp autumn weather was ideal for a ride through the hills of the Amish country south of Wooster, then on to Coshocton, Newark, and our destination.

Soon after passing through Millersburg, normally a sleepy little farming town but lively on a Saturday morning, I broke a lengthy silence by saying, "You've never told me why you're going to Buckeye Lake this time of year."

"No big deal, buddy. Just a referral case out of our office in St. Louis. Some broad from Akron, about thirty and a clerk at a five and dime on the east side, dropped out of sight a few

months back, and her brother hired the agency to track her down. He's her only relative, and he's worried."

"You should go into politics, Jack."

"Politics? Why?"

"Because you've mastered the art of beating your gums without ever getting around to answering a question. I'll try again: why are you going to Buckeye Lake?"

For a moment or so it seemed a laconic laugh was to be his only answer, then he elaborated: "This tomato spent a week down at the lake recuperating from surgery. At least she checked into the hotel for a week. Paid in advance, but according to the sheriff's report, nobody saw her around after that. When the week was up, she didn't check out. Left a cheap suitcase and a few articles of clothing behind."

"How'd the brother know she was there?"

"Got a postcard from her. He told our manager in St. Louis that it came as a big surprise. Neither one was much for writing, but he'd gotten a note from her just a few days earlier saying she'd been in the hospital. Before that he hadn't heard from her in six months or more."

"Think she may have drowned in the lake?"

"I don't have the first clue, buddy. That's why we're taking a ride. When we get there, I'll check things at the hotel, and you can nose around the neighborhood."

"Does that mean I'll be getting operative's wages?" It had happened once before, and I was hoping it would again. Seventy-five cents an hour would come in handy.

After mulling it over Jack said, "We'll see what develops, buddy. Maybe you'll come up with a story and get paid overtime by the paper."

"Oh sure. Fat chance, Jack. If you think the *Times-Press* pays a reporter overtime to write about a woman disappearing more than a hundred miles from Akron, you're living in a dream world."

Few places are as desolate as an amusement park boarded up for the winter. I wandered aimlessly for a few minutes, pausing outside the Dodgem, my favorite ride, to wonder if the cars were stored inside or taken to a warmer building. Not that it mattered, of course. No one was around, so I went back to the old hotel.

The desk clerk, a neatly turned out fellow with prissy mannerisms, was showing Jack the register. "See for yourself," he said as I approached. "In summer we get a few traveling

salesmen or other men on their own looking for a lively place to spend the night. We didn't have any lone male guests the day she checked in or the one after that. In any event she wasn't much to look at. A real introvert, sour as a lemon. I couldn't imagine that she was meeting a man."

"You can't go on looks," said Jack. "Still it's unlikely she'd pay by check if she was trying to keep secrets."

"Hardly anyone writes a check here, which is why I remember her. She had one ready ahead of time. Just filled in the numbers, that's all. Insisted on paying for a week in advance, too. How many people do that?"

"You didn't see her again after she went to her room?"

"I already told you. She didn't drop off her room key even once, then walked off with it when she left."

"How about taking a gander at the suitcase she left behind?"

"Be my guest. It's back here in the office." We followed him to a musty-smelling room with two desks, a pair of filing cabinets, a safe dating back to the McKinley administration, and along the far wall a collection of cardboard boxes and battered suitcases apparently confiscated in lieu of payment. The clerk took one from the stack, dropped it on a desk and then

left us alone saying, "Help yourself."

A couple of inexpensive dresses, some underclothes, a pair of brown silk stockings tucked inside businesslike shoes, and a few toilet articles were all the suitcase contained. Everything was freshly laundered. Jack Eddy examined each piece individually, then felt along the sides of the suitcase. "Nothing much here, buddy," he said. "Funny she didn't bring a book or magazine to help pass the time."

"She might have had something in her purse."

Jack grunted a reply, then went to the doorway and said, "Is the head housekeeper around?"

"Just follow the hallway to the left," the desk clerk replied. "You'll find her."

When we did, she was a big and untidy woman with chiseled features that would have allowed her to pass for a man. After introducing himself Jack nodded toward me and said, "My assistant, Abraham Geary." He knew I hated being called Abraham rather than Bram, and that being referred to as his assistant would get me steamed. When he asked if she remembered a guest named Vera Slotnik, she replied with an emphatic nod of her head. It

was the first time I had heard the missing woman's name.

"I thought there was something funny about it at the time," the housekeeper said. "After a few days the maid told me the bed hadn't been slept in since the first night unless the woman was making it herself. From then on I went down every morning to see for myself. It didn't look like anybody had been in the room from one day to the next."

"Did you report that to anyone?"

"Why should I? It just meant less work for us."

A few late diners were still at lunch when Jack Eddy buttonholed the dining room manager. He said he seldom knew guests by name but he would have remembered a lone woman eating by herself for a week. There had been none, he was certain of it.

I was hungry, but rather than asking for a table Jack led the way back to the classy Auburn. Just as I was about to complain he pulled up in front of a roadside diner we had seen earlier a short distance from the hotel. Jack ordered a hamburger and coffee, I had two cheeseburgers, a chocolate malt, and coffee. Aside from the counterman who doubled as short-order cook we were the only ones in the place.

"Kind of quiet," said Jack when the man brought coffee.

"Whaddya expect this time o' year?"

"Didn't I read about some excitement around here a few months back? Somebody drowning or something?"

"Not that I heard about."

"It's a big lake. I guess you could go under out there and nobody would be the wiser."

"Maybe, if you was wearin' concrete shoes."

"Rise to the surface otherwise, that what you mean?"

"You got it, mac."

While the potbellied character who obviously ate too much of his own cooking was busy at the grill, I said, "Now what, Jack? Looks like you've hit a dead end."

He tugged on an ear, staring vacantly off in space. "There's something screwy about the whole setup, buddy. Enough so that I'm starting to get interested."

"How do you mean?"

"For starters, why pick a noisy dump full of kids at an amusement park for recuperating? When the Slotnik dame gets here and checks in, she goes out of her way to call attention to herself, then turns around and pulls a Judge Crater act. She mails a postcard to a brother she had just written to, which was out of character.

And this is a family place, not a hangout for single broads. Sure, they get some men just passing through for a night, but that's not the business they're after. Taking that into account, a woman all by her lonesome should stick out like a boil on the nose. Instead, once she's registered, no one lays eyes on her again."

"You think she just stayed one night, then took off?"

"Maybe not that long. You can go into a room and in thirty seconds make it look like somebody slept in the bed."

"What about the car? Did it disappear, too?"

"She didn't come by car. The desk clerk was catching a breath of air and spotted her getting off the Columbus bus. That doesn't mean she had to leave the same way."

We were back in Akron by late afternoon. I had suggested stopping at the newspaper in Newark, the largest city near the lake, and checking back issues to see if anything out of the ordinary happened at the time Vera Slotnik vanished. It seemed like a good way to ease into the Wellington payroll for an hour or two, but Jack Eddy said it would be a waste of time.

I used much the same words in telling Sue Baney about our trip. "For all that we accom-

plished we could just as well have stayed home. For the life of me I can't figure why Jack went there himself instead of assigning the job to one of his operatives. It's hardly a case to get excited about."

"It isn't?" she said, frowning a little and forgetting to hold her cone upright so that strawberry ice cream began running down one side. "This Vera drops off the face of the earth, but it's just another woman, is that what you mean?"

"Of course not, but it's like looking for a needle . . . oh, you know what I mean. She probably just wanted to start life all over again in a new town."

"Oh, Bram, really! Then why go to the trouble and expense of stopping first at Buckeye Lake? And why send a postcard to her only relative telling him she was there?"

She paused to lick ice cream off her fingers so I said, "Maybe somebody was after her and she was trying to shake them off her trail."

"That's about the silliest thing you've ever said. A woman of thirty, a clerk at Woolworth's, unmarried, just out of the hospital—who would be after her?"

"How would I know? But it's possible." The bright lights and garish surroundings at the big Isaly's on East Market Street

weren't providing the atmosphere I craved, so I said, "Let's take a little spin around town and forget all about her."

"That's exactly what somebody wants people to do."

I was preparing a retort when Sue Baney, a dab of pink ice cream clinging above her upper lip, gave me one of her pixieish smiles, then all else was *really* forgotten.

I didn't realize a payoff would be involved when on Monday Jack Eddy said, "Lunch is on me today, buddy." It was my twenty-fourth birthday so I foolishly believed he was just being a pal, a nice guy. I should have known better; the free lunch went out with handlebar mustaches, skirts that barely cleared the ground, and Caruso singing "Over There."

I would have accepted even if Jack hadn't added the magic words: "Noon at Kraker's Old Heidelberg." Editors and publishers dined at the rathskeller on South Main, reporters grabbed a sandwich across the street at Ptomaine Tommie's. Unless someone else was picking up the check, of course.

Jack didn't mention my birthday, but he was patient. He allowed me to bask in the warmth of the dark paneling and savor the last morsel of wienerschnitzel before signal-



ing for a second round of dark imported beer. When the steins were on the table and I was tamping tobacco into a brand new Kaywoodie pipe, a gift from my sister, he leaned toward me, a give-with-the-info gleam in his eye. "What," he said, "can you tell me about a sawbones named Vandaleen?"

I needed a moment to return to the realities of a troubled world. As I did so on that chilly November day, the pleasant-ries of the Old Heidelberg turned suddenly sinister. The German atmosphere brought the daily tirades of Hitler to mind; rather than smiling waiters in dinner jackets I saw goose-stepping storm troopers in jack boots and coal-scuttle helmets. The war clouds were growing darker each day, Europe was drawing steadily nearer to Akron.

The tapping of Jack's fingertips on the tabletop speeded my transition to the present. "Dr. Julian Vandaleen? He operates a clinic on Case Avenue. You can walk in and be treated, but it's really sort of a private hospital with five or six beds and a nurse on duty around the clock."

Jack threw his napkin down on the table. "Hell, buddy, I know *that*. Everybody in town knows *that*. I want to hear

about his wife, and you know it."

"What's your interest in Dr. Vandaleen? A new case?"

"The same one, friend. His clinic is where Vera Slotnik had her operation. So what about the doc's wife?"

"She disappeared about fifteen months ago. The story broke on August 17, 1936."

Skepticism clouded Jack's face. "You remember the exact date? How come?"

"The St. Louis Cardinals were in town that day for an exhibition game with the Akron Yankees, and I wanted to see it. Ben Goldsmith figured I should stay on top of the Vandaleen story even though I had already written everything there was to say. I told him I'd go to the game, then work on through the evening. Anyway, the Yanks knocked Paul Dean out of the box and won in thirteen innings. It was before you arrived in town, Jack, but you should have been there. Dizzy Dean wandered through the grandstand talking to people and signing autographs. It was a great game, and the old Gas House Gang wasn't happy when it was over."

Nor was Jack happy. "Are you through reminiscing, friend? Now can we discuss the subject at hand? What turned up during the investigation,

and where do things stand today?"

"The case is still open, I guess, but it's on the back burner. There've never been any real developments, Jack. Plato Largis was the detective assigned to it, and he thinks Victoria Vandaleen is now part of a new bridge up in Cuyahoga County."

"Come again?"

"They were pouring concrete at the time, and Plato thinks that's where she ended up. I guess it's as good a theory as any. You think there's a tie-in with your case?"

"Who knows, but when I found out Vera Slotnik was in the Vandaleen Clinic, I remembered hearing talk about the doc's wife disappearing. Seems like one helluva big coincidence, buddy. What did the cops do, work the doc over or what?"

"Dr. Vandaleen's a big man in town, Jack. He's got connections where it counts. You don't use bright lights and rubber hoses on somebody like that."

"In other words they did nothing."

"Be reasonable, Jack. Largis ran down every lead that came along but kept hitting brick walls. Mrs. Vandaleen had dropped out of sight a week before her husband even got

around to reporting it. By then the trail was cold."

"What were these leads he checked out? Come on, buddy, quit making me pump you and give with the whole story."

I did, but most of it was common knowledge, the rest pure speculation on the part of cops either frustrated with or skeptical of the whole affair.

On a warm August morning in 1936 Victoria Vandaleen left her home on Buchtel Avenue and seemed to walk off the face of the earth. Her husband told the police she was on her way to a dental appointment. None had been booked, said the dentist. School was out for the summer, and Victoria never left the children, a boy of seven and a girl three years older, to shift for themselves when she was away from the house. She was an active woman, so the unemployed nurse who watched over them was summoned several times a week. But not on the day Victoria vanished.

The doctor said there had been a minor argument, nothing of importance. When she didn't return, he believed she had gone off somewhere for a few days to simmer down and would soon be back. It had happened before, he said. He hadn't wanted to embarrass her, which was why he waited more than a week before notify-

ing the police. If the doctor was correct, his wife had set out ill-prepared, leaving all her clothes behind and having only what little money was in her purse.

At the time a deep scratch on the doctor's left cheek was only beginning to heal. It was nothing, he explained, the result of carelessly handling stiff wire he was bending to place around a flowerbed. When asked why there was no wire guarding the flowers, he said he had abandoned the project and disposed of the wire following the accident. None of the neighbors could recall ever having seen the doctor working in the yard. His wife tended the flowers, a boy was hired to cut the grass and trim the hedges.

The only indications that Victoria Vandaleen was alive were suspect at best. A family friend, a lawyer, claimed to have seen her on a crowded Philadelphia sidewalk four months after she disappeared. By the time he found a place to park his car she was gone. There may have been a resemblance, but he couldn't have caught more than a glimpse of the woman. Then in March of 1937 an Akron socialite known to be sober on rare occasions swore that a woman dining with a dark and handsome man in a Mexico City restaurant

had been the missing Victoria. The socialite couldn't leave those at the table, she claimed, so she hadn't spoken to her old friend. The joke in certain circles was that you couldn't leave your table if you couldn't stand up.

Jack didn't summarily dismiss the possibility. "To a woman from Northeast Ohio most Mexicans would look dark. Some of them qualify as handsome."

"Come on, Jack. If the woman really believed it was Victoria, nothing could have kept her at her table. She'd have talked to her even if it meant crawling across the dining room on all fours. One more thing, Mrs. Vandaleen's sister from Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, said the man hasn't been born who could persuade Victoria to leave her kids. Her whole life revolved around them."

"What did Largis think about it?"

"He agreed, but he said the sister admitted hating Dr. Vandaleen for years so her feelings didn't count for much. She wanted to see him behind bars, or better yet strapped in Old Sparky down at the state pen. But Plato said that aside from the doctors everyone he talked to agreed there was never a more devoted mother."

"And the doc?"

"He was more or less non-committal. Without actually badmouthing her, he left people with the impression that Victoria wasn't any great shakes as a mother and a complete washout as a wife. You know, Jack, there's a chance she might have run off just to get away from her husband. He's a big brute of a man and comes across as one who could be pretty rough on those around him."

Jack shrugged off the suggestion. "It doesn't fit the picture, buddy. Say the doc was a bully and really mistreating her, would she take off and leave the children in his clutches? It's possible, of course, that everybody misjudged the way she felt about the kids. Maybe they didn't really matter to her. Another possibility is that some third party took her away forcibly. But even if her body turns up, it isn't a sure thing that the doc killed her."

"Maybe not, but my money's on him. So is Plato's. In well over a year he's the only suspect to turn up."

"That doesn't mean anything," said Jack, glancing at his watch. "Look, friend, I've got to tie up some loose ends on another case I'm working on. After that I'll make a run out to Vera Slotnik's old apartment. Stop by the agency about

four or four thirty and ride along."

After making the afternoon rounds on the police beat I went back to the *Times-Press* office at East Exchange and High streets and pulled the clip file on the Victoria Vandaleen disappearance. There was nothing there to remind me of some point I'd forgotten to tell Jack, but city editor Ben Goldsmith spotted the folder on my desk. "Some new development?" he said.

"Nothing, Ben. It's funny, though, Jack Eddy's working on a case involving a woman who disappeared right after getting out of the Vandaleen Clinic."

"Think there's a connection?"

"I don't see how there could be." I went on to tell about our trip to Buckeye Lake. When I finished he said, "How come I didn't get a story on it?"

"There isn't much to hang one on, Ben. Anyway, I didn't think you'd be interested."

Goldsmith slapped the heel of his hand against his forehead, then walked in a wide circle around my desk. When he spoke, it was to himself and quietly, but I knew that wouldn't last. "Another Akron woman disappears and he doesn't think I'd be interested. Two in a year's time but our readers wouldn't care to hear

about it." As anticipated, his voice could be heard across the city room when he leaned close to my face and said, "So tell me, Mr. Judge of Interesting Stories, do you happen to know where this second disappearing woman lived?"

"On MacNaughton Street."

"Really now. McNaughton Street in East Akron. And Victoria Vandaleen, I believe she lived on Buchtel Avenue. How far would you say, just offhand, McNaughton Street is from Buchtel Avenue?"

"One block, Ben," I replied sheepishly. "But McNaughton runs to the east of Arlington Street and the Vandaleen house is west of Arlington."

"Oh, really? Well, now that explains everything. After all they weren't next door neighbors. Not quite." He straightened up so we were no longer nose to nose, but his finger was shaking only inches from my face. "Now let me make something clear to you, fella. The next time you decide what I might or might not be interested in without first consulting me, you may be lucky enough to find an opening for a reporter on the *Millersburg Farmer Hub*. For now I'll expect a story on my desk first thing in the morning."

He turned and walked away, then swung around again and

called, "Another thing, if you had filed a story for the Sunday edition I would have turned you in for overtime. Since you didn't you can kiss the money goodbye."

When he was gone I covertly glanced around the city room to see who might have overheard. Someone was at every desk as if the staff was expecting a roll call. All eyes were on me and there was a smirk on most faces. Happy birthday to me.

McNaughton Street, was close to home, so rather than riding with Jack I followed him in my gasping old Chevy. In every way possible the car was making it clear that it had no intention of going through another Akron winter.

The apartment that had been Vera Slotnik's occupied the third floor of a large, converted house. Like those around it the house was fairly well maintained, but the neighborhood was a rough one. Good people, at least for the most part, but all graduates of the well known school of hard knocks.

The landlady, a plump woman of sixty or so, hadn't rolled out the red carpet in anticipation of our arrival. It didn't matter; in a few blinks of the eye Jack Eddy had melted her resistance. As far as I could see his personality was cold as a mackerel's, yet he could

charm any female from nine to ninety. At every opportunity I studied his technique for my own use. All it had earned me were rebuffs and a solitary slap in the face.

The present occupant of Vera's old flat was a long distance truck driver for Goodyear and wouldn't be back until the end of the week. After a short debate with herself the landlady decided he wouldn't mind if she showed us around. "But there's nothing of Vera's still there," she warned.

"What did you do with her things?" asked Jack.

"They're in the basement. There isn't very much, of course. It's a furnished apartment, you know."

Looking it over didn't take long. One fairly large room with an In-a-Door bed, a tiny kitchen, bath and closet, that was all. The landlady then led us down to the cellar and left us alone. She was correct, Vera Slotnik's possessions were meager. Several dresses hung from hangers, a cardboard carton held the remainder of her clothes. Another contained what little she had in the way of personal items; some cheap souvenirs and knickknacks, a small photo album with only a few pictures in it, and several pieces of dime-store jewelry. Not much for thirty years of living.

A small folder tied with string held her birth certificate, a lapsed insurance policy for a thousand dollars, several letters from her brother but no others, a diploma from a high school in St. Louis, a variety of receipts, and a copy of her Social Security card. Jack went through them one by one, jotting a few notes but finding nothing of real interest, nothing that seemed to provide a clue to her disappearance.

Most of the twelve or fifteen photos in the album were obviously from childhood, but one showing three smiling young ladies seemed to have been taken recently. Jack carried it in his hand when we went upstairs.

"Is one of these Vera?" he asked, and the landlady pointed to the woman on the left. "The one in the middle is my daughter and the other is a friend of hers."

"Does your daughter live with you?"

"Oh no, she lives in New York. This was taken when she was home on a visit last spring and her friend came along."

"What was Vera like? Did she get along with people?"

"Oh my, yes. She was a sweet girl. Just as pleasant as could be. Always had a cheery smile and never was late with the rent."

"Did she pay by check?"

"Yes, and that surprised me. No more than she made, it seemed like a waste of money for her to have a checking account. I thought that it may have made her feel good. You know, like she was doing well in the world."

"Do you know why she went into the Vandaleen Clinic?"

"It was just a minor thing. She had a cyst on . . . well, in a private area, that was all."

"Were you surprised when she told you she was going away for a week to recuperate?"

"I was indeed. She didn't actually tell me, though, or I would have asked if there had been complications. She came by one day while I was out shopping and left a note for me saying she would be out of town."

"Did you keep the note?"

"No, there didn't seem to be any reason to at the time."

"It was in her handwriting, was it?"

"As far as I could tell. I didn't see her writing too often, of course, but I never questioned that it was her hand. Do you think it may not have been?"

Jack smiled, shaking his head. "No reason to. Just following the routine, that's all."

At the curb I took the picture from him. "You know, Jack, I

think Vera Slotnik's kind of cute. That desk clerk at the lake must have strange tastes in women."

"It takes all kinds, buddy. I'm stopping at Woolworth's on East Market to talk to her boss. You want to go on home or with me?"

"I'll head for the barn, Jack. Don't be long or you'll be late for supper and you know how Mrs. Bauer gets."

From what he told me later I didn't miss anything at the five and ten. Vera's supervisor and a few of the women who had worked with her had nothing but good things to say. All remarked on her cheerfulness, but as Jack pointed out when I mentioned it, having surgery could change that in a hurry. I could tell, though, that he had developed doubts that the woman at Buckeye Lake was really Vera Slotnik.

Kitty Bauer contrived to keep me upstairs until her mother called that supper was on the table. Her way of doing so was asking me to read a short story she had written on the sly, hoping I would express an opinion as to whether or not it was publishable. It was the first time I had been in her room although I often passed the open door. Now, with it shut behind us and the lovely



Kitty seated so close beside me on the bed that I could feel the warmth of her body, I couldn't help being a little aroused. Not enough to keep me from seeing the story was awful. I mumbled something about not being a good judge and told her to submit it to a magazine.

When we answered Mrs. Bauer's call, I was unprepared for what awaited us in the dining room. Everyone was there ahead of us, those on the near side turned in their chairs so they could watch my face as I walked in. A chocolate cake with twenty-four burning candles was on the table, and draped over my own chair was a new tweed overcoat. And not a cheap coat, one of the twenty-five dollar models from Bond's.

The really big surprise, though, was finding Sue Baney at an extra chair next to mine. Thank God she hadn't opened the door of Kitty's room a few minutes earlier. And that she wasn't aware of the visions that had forced their way into my mind at the time.

I tried on the coat, which was a perfect fit, and blew out the candles while everyone, Jack Eddy included, sang "Happy Birthday" in a key that would have set dogs to howling. Then when I sat down Sue Baney placed a small package on my plate which, when opened, held

a new Elgin wristwatch, one of the better twelve-dollar models.

Later Sue and I went out for a ride. We stopped for ice cream at Kesselring's near the airport, and even though we both had to work the next day, it was after ten o'clock when I got home. Jack Eddy was waiting on the porch, having heard my Chevy herald our approach with a lusty backfire. He said, "How about taking a little walk down to Case Avenue, buddy."

He meant to the Vandaleen Clinic, of course. No one in his right mind ever went pleasure walking on Case Avenue. From end to end it was as dreary a street as you'd find in Akron or anywhere else. After dark it could be dangerous, and even in broad daylight the street was a little intimidating to the faint of heart.

So off we went to East Market Street, past the Goodyear plant and, on our side of the street, the Lenox Cafe, the Willard Pool Room, the Strand Hotel and a few other questionable establishments. At the bottom of an incline only a short distance from the boardinghouse on Dudley Street was Case Avenue with its seedy bars, greasy lunchrooms, vacant storefronts, a union hall or two, a corner store selling used pulp magazines two for a

nickel, five for a dime. I stopped there occasionally for a *Black Mask*, *Doc Savage*, *Dime Detective*, or *G-8 and His Battle Aces*.

Then there was the jewel in Case Avenue's crown, the Vandaleen Clinic. It was a two story building of red brick, no more than fifty feet wide and a hundred deep. Over the front door a low-wattage bulb enclosed in a cream-colored globe added a "step inside to your doom" touch to the sinister appearance of the clinic. On a bright sunny day it wasn't a bad looking building, but the sun wasn't shining as we drew near.

"You're not going inside, are you?" I said. "Dr. Vandaleen won't be there this time of night unless it's an emergency."

"If I thought he was waiting, I wouldn't go in," Jack replied, at the same time pulling open one of a pair of double doors. "Not right now, that is."

Inside was a reception desk on our left. No one was there, nor in the long corridor facing us. The walls had once been white but now were gray, which was neither surprising nor a sign of neglect. In East Akron's industrial neighborhoods the color white vanished overnight. We walked far enough to see that all the doors with frosted glass windows

were closed and that no light showed beyond any of them. At the sound of footsteps on a wide staircase opposite the reception desk we returned to the front of the building.

An unattractive woman of forty or so, stern and forbidding in a starched white uniform, looked us up and down while descending the last few steps. In a baritone lacking femininity she said, "The clinic's closed for the night."

"So I noticed," said Jack. "I wanted to inquire about treatment for my wife. She's been having abdominal pain, and your place was recommended by a former patient. Are your rooms upstairs?"

"Yes, but they're all occupied and everyone's asleep so I can't let you see one. Come back during the day if you wish to consult Dr. Vandaleen. If not, the receptionist will supply whatever information you require and schedule an appointment for your wife. Which former patient recommended the clinic?"

"Vera Slotnik."

Her eyebrows rose. "Is that so? How nice of her."

"Recall her, do you?"

"I recall *all* our patients. Vera made a special impression."

"She's a sweet kid all right. Well, I'll try to stop back in the morning. Thanks for the help."

"Good night, Mr. . . . what did you say your name is?"

"I didn't. It's Dorsey. Thomas Dorsey."

When we were on the sidewalk I said, "For Pete's sake, Jack, couldn't you do better than that? Tommy Dorsey. I suppose she thought I was Jimmy."

"Her thoughts were elsewhere, buddy. Didn't you catch the flicker in her eyes when I mentioned Vera Slotnik?"

"Yeah, I did, but figured it might be my imagination."

"It wasn't, friend, and you can bet on it. Five'll get you ten—no, make it twenty—that one former patient she wasn't expecting to hear from was Vera Slotnik."

Goldsmith ran my story without comment, but I needed something sensational to get back in his good graces. I didn't find it at the police station. Security for the evening appearance of Eleanor Roosevelt at the Akron Armory was on every mind. In Cleveland the night before she had been on the same program with Dick Powell and Joan Blondell. Each of them had introduced themselves, but Eleanor didn't catch their names and later asked someone who they were. Apparently the First Lady didn't see too many movies.

I left work a little early and stopped at City Hospital to see my kid sister Catharine, a student nurse in her second year. She was doing well and enjoying her studies, which pleased me. I was twelve, Catharine only eight, at the time our parents were killed when a car skidded out of control on the steep, rain-slick Tallmadge Hill east of Brittain Road and crashed head-on into their Oakland sedan. From the start I fitted in at the Children's Home, thriving on the male companionship, but it was difficult for Catharine to adapt to the abrupt change in her life. It wasn't my nature to worry, yet I did nearly every time I saw her. Now it seemed she had found a way of life that made her happy.

She was surprised to see me. I drove past the hospital every day but didn't stop for a visit as often as I should. Catharine was tall for a girl, nearly five nine, which made her only six inches shorter than me. She looked fit and trim in her uniform. After listening to her news and thanking her a second time for the birthday present I said, "Do you ever hear any talk about the Vandaleen Clinic?"

She gave me a funny look, biting her lower lip to force back a smile. She barely suc-

ceeded. "Have you been doing something you shouldn't, Bram?"

I didn't comprehend. "What are you talking about?"

"You mean you really don't know? I thought a newspaperman knew everything that goes on in town."

"Are you trying to annoy me, Catharine? If so—"

"Oh, Bram, you can be such a jerk at times. Suppose a man finds out he's going to be a father but isn't keen on the idea and neither is his girl, what does he do? He takes her to the Vandaleen Clinic."

Now, after a moment of thought, I comprehended. "Are you telling me it's a place where a woman can get an . . . uh, you know, an abortion?" Saying it to my little sister left me feeling embarrassed. For Pete's sake, I told myself, she's a nurse and knows a lot more about biology than you ever will. Still, I was uncomfortable.

"See, big brother, you came right out and said it. Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Don't patronize me, Catharine. I'm not a patient, you know. Don't give me any of that 'it's time for our nap so let's lie down' stuff. Performing an abortion is illegal, so if you're right, why haven't I heard about it? Even at the time Dr.

Vandaleen's wife disappeared there wasn't a word said about abortion."

"He doesn't advertise in the *Times-Press*, Bram. That doesn't mean everyone in the profession doesn't know what goes on there. I've heard worse than that, too."

"Such as?"

She looked over both shoulders to make certain that no one else was in the small lounge where we were seated, then in a conspiratorial whisper said, "Promise you won't tell anyone you heard it from me? I'd be in hot water if you did."

"Okay, my lips are sealed."

"Does that mean promise?"

"Yes, dammit, I promise. Now what have you heard?"

"A nurse I know worked at the clinic for a while. She swears that sometimes Dr. Vandaleen experiments on certain patients. The ones who are on their own. You know, those who don't have visitors or family members close by."

I was stunned. "Experiments? What do you mean?"

"With their heads."

"Good God, Catharine, what are you talking about?"

"While they're under ether, he tries to alter their personalities."

"How? You can't mean with a knife?"

"With a drill."

"Catharine, is this the way you girls amuse yourself in your free time? What do you do, try to dream up the most fanciful tales possible to frighten each other?"

She sat back in her chair with an all-knowing smile. "I'm just telling you what I've heard."

I got up and walked to the door, then turned back and stood over her. "Catharine, don't *ever* talk to anyone about stuff like that, or you'll end up in real trouble. You know what slander is, don't you?"

She smiled up at me. "It isn't slander if it's true."

I headed for the Lenox Cafe for a badly needed drink, then suddenly changed plans and parked instead on Case Avenue south of Market and went into the Silver Dollar Cafe. When someone coined the phrase, "If you're looking for trouble you came to the right place," they were probably on a stool at the Silver Dollar.

A shot of Four Roses with a beer chaser settled my nerves. Young girls, the things they could come up with. Individually they were great, but get half a dozen of them together and their tongues and their imaginations ran wild. And yet Catharine had never been one

to get carried away. On the other hand, how well did I really know her? Maybe the all-girl environment wasn't as good for her as I had believed. But still she had always been level-headed.

I ordered a second beer. A couple of stools away a pair of oldtimers were arguing over whether Rube Marquand or Mordecai Brown had been the superior pitcher. They went on to quarrel over the pronunciation of the name of Johnny Evers, the Cubs' second baseman in the early years of the century. One claimed the name rhymed with beaver, the other favored clever.

When the old fellow on the far stool took a break to visit the men's room, I said to the other, "Did you get out to see the Cardinals when they were in town last year?"

"Nah, I don't like the way these kids play the game today. Gehrig's okay, and maybe Lefty Grove, but I wouldn't give ya a nickel for the rest. Ain't been a real ball club since the Yankees o' '27."

"They're still not too bad. Lived around here long?"

"Born down the street in '64. It was Middlebury back then. Didn't annex to Akron till I was eight."

"Then the Civil War was going on when you were born."

"Yep. Too young for it myself."

I hadn't figured they were drafting one-year-olds when it ended, but kept the thought to myself. "The Vandaleen Clinic, how long's it been there?"

"Well now, lemme see. It was back in '23 when the doc bought the building and opened up the clinic. It was in '87 that they tore down the old building and put up the new one the clinic's in. Built it right on the same foundation. Part of it, that is. The old one was a lot smaller and set way back on the lot. Historic place it was."

I wanted to talk about the clinic, but the old fellow was more interested in the building itself, or its predecessor, so to be polite I said, "Historic? How's that?"

"Guess you've heard tell o' the Underground Railway?"

"Sure, the organization that moved runaway slaves north. Helped them get over to Canada, didn't they?"

"Some of 'em. Some stayed this side o' the lake. Well, that old building was one o' the northernmost stations on the line. Brung 'em up from Martins Ferry, they did, an' a couple o' other places. Heard my papa tell stories 'bout it by the hour. He was just a young fella at the time an' claimed to have helped out. Never was able to

tell if he really did or was just yarnin'."

"Yeah, everybody's got stories."

"Well now, I know for a fact the old building was used that way. Seen it for myself."

"You did? How was that?"

"Helped build the new one, the one there now. That was my trade, brick mason. These places along here, I worked on about all of 'em. The Goodyear and Mohawk plants, too. And the Kelly-Springfield that's Goodyear Plant Two now."

"What exactly did you see of the Underground Railroad?"

"In the old days we called it the railway. Well, you know how the ground drops off at the back o' the clinic?" I didn't, but nodded so he'd continue. "Back there was the entrance to a second cellar. A sub-cellar under the first. That's where they hid the runaways."

"No kidding, and you saw it yourself?"

"With my own eyes. Like I said before, we just built right on the old foundation. He had to extend it out to the street, o' course. Saved the owners a bundle o' money doin' it that way. At first that place was a factory, ya know."

I didn't, but said I did. "Then that sub-basement would still be there, right? Or did you fill it in?"

"No reason to do that. The old foundation was built like a fort. It'll be there forever."

"Is there still a way to get into it? The sub-basement, I mean."

"Ain't been back there for a spell. Forty years maybe, but there was two outside entrances. You know the kind, slanted double doors that open up with steps leadin' down. The one on the left, lookin' at it from the back I mean, was set lower and led down to the sub-cellar. Then there was a way down from the inside too, just a narrow, steep stone staircase. Wasn't somethin' you'd want to tackle after a couple o' snorts."

His companion returned and started off again by saying, "Did ya ask this feller if it was E-vers, and did he tell ya yes?"

"Don't need to ask nobody. It was Ev-ers. Tinker to EV-ers to Chance. Never heard it said otherwise, did ya?"

I gulped the rest of my beer, said, "It's been nice talking to you," and hurried out before I got embroiled in the argument. For crying out loud, I thought everybody knew it was Ev-ers.

Jack Eddy could have picked a better night for phoning Mrs. Bauer to say he wouldn't make it for supper. He missed out on some great chicken and noodles with biscuits. After coffee I

climbed the stairs to my room and for ten minutes tried to follow the intrigue in *Death on the Nile*, the latest adventure from the Agatha Christie production line. Thoughts closer to home made it impossible for me to concentrate.

In the front parlor Bus Bauer and a few others were settled in for another evening of listening to radio. Miss Ferrabee, Mrs. Bauer, and Kitty had hurried off to catch a bus downtown to hear Eleanor Roosevelt speak. Bus was fiddling with the knobs on the Grunow console, cursing under his breath when he couldn't get it tuned to his satisfaction. At one end of a massive couch dating to the Edwardian Era Mr. Reimer was reading the *Times-Press* home edition, shaking his head in dismay at the state of things. Probably the story of the filibuster by southern senators against a proposed anti-lynch law. I went on outside.

A biting wind had turned the night air raw. I shoved my hands deep in the pockets of my new overcoat and walked the streets of the neighborhood—Laird, Fulton, Willard—savoring the homey smell of smoke from coal furnaces.

From a booth at Lea Drugs on East Market I phoned Plato Largis at home. Had he heard anything, I asked, about abor-

tions being performed at the Vandaleen Clinic?

"Sure, kid. It's been going on for years."

"The police avert their eyes?"

"It's clean, it's safe.. What would you do, Bram, shut the clinic down and give the back-room butchers more business? Don't those coat-hanger artists do enough harm as it is? Like it or not the job's going to be done, you know that. A professional setting beats the alternative."

If there was a sound basis for arguing the point, it escaped me. I went down the street and ordered coffee at the Coney Island Lunch. The radio was playing "Gloomy Sunday," best of the suicide songs that had blossomed during the Depression. A dangerous song, one banned by many stations.

So half of Catharine's story had been on target. Was it possible she had batted a thousand? The thought brought on a shudder. Thankfully, the music ended. An upbeat Goodman tune came on, giving my morale a needed boost.

Jack Eddy's Auburn was parked in front of the wholesale dry cleaning plant next door to the boardinghouse when I returned to Dudley Street. After checking the parlor and not seeing him, I went up to his room and rapped on the door.

He cracked it enough for me to see a wary eye peering out.

"Joe sent me," I said, giving the door a push.

It was early, but he was in his shorts and undershirt, getting ready for bed. "I'm bushed, buddy," he said. "Been a long day."

"Get anywhere on the case?"

"Wrapped it up tonight. One of our ops tracked the guy to a shack outside Barberton. Had the company's money in a cardboard box under a pile of junk."

"You've lost me, Jack. I meant the Vera Slotnik case."

He wearily shook his head. I had never seen him look so beat. "Didn't have a minute to even think about it, friend. Maybe tomorrow. Right now I'm ready to hit the hay."

"I heard a couple of things about the Vandaleen Clinic."

He propped his pillow against the head of the bed and leaned back, sighing. "Shoot, buddy."

I told him about my visit to Catharine, the oldtimer at the Silver Dollar, my phone call to Plato Largis. He listened without comment. When I finished he was quiet for a moment or two, then swung his legs off the bed and reached out to where his pants were draped over a chair.

"We have to see what's in that sub-basement, friend."



"Why, Jack? Why us? Isn't it a job for the police?"

"What'll you tell 'em? Tell Largis to call out the reinforcements and raid the Vandaleen Clinic? If so, why didn't you do it when you phoned him? You know why, buddy."

As usual he was right. If I talked to Largis, he'd laugh at me. Plato wanted to do his job and he did it to the best of his ability, which meant better than most, but he operated under tight restrictions. That was why he'd laugh; he knew what the response would be if he suggested a raid to his superiors, and what the legal eagles in the prosecutor's office would have to say. He was hamstrung by rules and regulations, by the system we had created and were forced to live with.

We could just forget about it, of course. We could say, "Well, that's the way it goes," or "You can't fight city hall," or one of the other timeworn phrases that allow a person to sit back and do nothing. That was a popular course of action, or inaction, and we wouldn't lack for company if it were the one we chose to follow.

Then there was a third alternative. We could do it Jack Eddy's way. We could play loose with the laws limiting what Plato Largis and those like him could do, walk a tight-

rope between the legal and illegal and, if we fell, land on the latter side. Breaking a minor law if it meant correcting a major injustice was Jack Eddy's style. That was his role. He played it better than anyone I knew. In part because it was his job, beyond that because it was his nature.

My job was similar. A reporter worth his salt didn't settle for staying clear of the action and accepting news handouts from the police, politicians, or anyone else. There were times when I had to be reminded of that.

"Okay, Jack," I said. "What's the plan?"

He gave me a poke on the arm, grinning. "Wish I had one, buddy. Let's take another walk down to Case Avenue and see what develops."

We began at the back of the Vandaleen Clinic, which meant approaching it from the rear of another building to the north. It was rough going, skirting around glacial rocks and stunted trees, forcing our way through tangles of brush and briars that made it seem we were in the forest primeval rather than the heart of a sizable city. I was glad I had worn an old jacket rather than my new overcoat.

There were no windows at the back of the building, so once

we reached that point, Jack was able to use his flashlight. He swept it back and forth along the foundation but only one set of slanted doors was revealed. We found where the others had been before the old entryway was removed and cemented over.

The wooden doors leading to the upper basement were padlocked. We might have forced them with the right tools, but we didn't have them. Jack did, however, have a screwdriver blade on his knife, and the screws anchoring the hasp to the aged wood were exposed. He chuckled softly. "An expensive lock and a few rusted screws out in the open that make it worthless. Someone made it easy for us, buddy."

The hinges creaked when he lifted the door on the left. Not loud enough to be heard by anyone more than a short distance away but enough to add one more butterfly to those already flitting about in my stomach. I followed him down a few stone steps to a furnace room with a coal bin and an oversized hot water tank nearby. He played the flashlight along the lower wall, looking for the place where the old and new foundations met.

We had to go into the next room to find it, then back to the first to locate a thick wooden

door hidden by the water tank. There wasn't a lock, just a two-by-four that dropped into a sturdy metal bracket, an effective way of seeing that no one on the other side could get past.

Jack went first, down stone steps so steep that a ladder would have been safer and easier. They led us to the rear of the sub-basement. We found ourselves in a dank chamber with fortresslike stone walls. Jack advanced cautiously toward the front of the building, stopping at a wood barrier of more recent construction. Directly ahead was a door secured in the same manner as the one at the head of the stairs. After lifting the bar, he flipped a light switch on the wall, then pulled the door open.

I stayed close on his heels as he entered a cell-like room lit by a small bulb in a ceiling fixture. On the left was a cot, on the right a chemical toilet and a table holding a porcelain wash basin. Huddled under blankets on the cot was a woman.

She didn't say anything, just lay there staring up at us with frightened eyes. My first thought was that we had found Vera Slotnik, then I realized the woman's features were different and she was older. Jack knelt beside the cot. "Don't be

frightened, we're here to help you. Who are you?"

The woman drew the blankets closer around her chin without replying. Jack said, "Are you Victoria?"

Still she didn't answer, but after a moment gave an all but imperceptible nod of her head.

"Can you get up? Will you be able to walk out of here?" After allowing time for an answer that didn't come, Jack lifted the blankets enough to see that she was clad in an institutional type gown and that under it her body was painfully thin.

He looked up and handed the flashlight to me. "Get help, buddy. Now you can go ahead and tell Largis to get out here fast, and with those reinforcements."

I turned and started toward the door, then pulled up short. Dr. Vandaleen, a twisted smile on his face, blocked the way. He was a formidable figure, broad shouldered and heavily muscled. A shock of dark hair had fallen over his forehead; his pale gray eyes glistened in the dim light. In his right hand was a businesslike knife, its long blade thin and tapered at both edges. A knife meant for killing.

He started toward me, raising the knife to shoulder height. There was little room for retreat. I dropped the flash-

light, stepped forward, and with both hands grabbed the arm with the knife.

I was several inches taller and half his age, yet my two arms were no match for his one. The knife moved steadily toward my chest.

Suddenly Jack was beside him. His arm went up, then quickly slashed downward. There was a sound like a melon being hit by a ball bat as Jack's leather-covered lead blackjack made contact with Vandaleen's skull.

The doctor hardly seemed to notice. He pulled his arm free of mine, then swung around to face Jack, the knife now belt-high and moving slowly back and forth.

Jack withdrew a step; I leaped on the doctor's back, wrapping both arms around him. Even so he continued moving toward Jack, but I had slowed him considerably. Jack sidestepped and brought the blackjack down on Dr. Vandaleen's head again and again.

At last he went limp in my arms and sagged downward. For good measure Jack delivered a blow to the wrist of the hand holding the knife. It fell to the floor, and Jack kicked it away, then helped me lower the doctor to a prone position.

When we straightened up again, Jack was grinning. All

traces of his earlier fatigue had vanished. "Well, buddy, you still better get help, but now I guess there's no big rush."

I phoned Largis from the reception desk, keeping an eye peeled for the unfriendly nurse. It was a younger one, startled when she saw me, who descended the stairs from the second floor. My adrenaline was still flowing in undue quantity, so I didn't ease the young woman's mind when I hung up the phone and advanced on her. "Where's the one who was here the other night?"

She began backing up the stairs. "Miss Flagg? She's not on duty tonight, but Dr. Vandaleen's here so you'd better not touch me."

I wasn't accustomed to scaring people. Seeing the effect I was having on her snapped me back to normal. "Don't be afraid, miss. I'm not going to hurt you. Do you know about the room in the basement?"

She obviously thought me mad. "What room?" she asked, wide-eyed.

I was spared an explanation when two uniformed policemen burst in the front door, hands on their holsters. An explanation would have been easier than what followed, being slammed against a wall and patted down. "Look," I said,

"I'm the one who called Largis and—"

I broke off when Plato Largis himself came in the door, half a dozen others close on his heels. He said, "For God's sake, Bram, what's this all about?"

"Well, Plato, it's like this. Jack Eddy and I . . ."

Sue Baney was indignant. "The things he did and they let that insane man out of jail? That's just swell!"

Rather than discussing it I would have preferred concentrating on dinner at Stone's Grill on South Main. I wanted Sue to enjoy herself and had pulled out all stops, ordering half a dozen oysters on the half shell for a quarter as an appetizer. Then we each had the fifty cent dinner: a glass of red wine, soup, stuffed pork tenderloin, au gratin potatoes, cauliflower, a strawberry sundae, and choice of coffee, tea, milk, or beer. Including a tip I'd spend a buck and a half, but I wanted it to be nice for her.

"The thing is, Sue, they're arguing about what to charge him with. I saw for myself that he's a maniac, but he's got friends in high places who say you can't accuse a doctor of doing anything wrong because he was treating his own wife."

"Treating her? By locking her in a dungeon?"

"Vandaleen says it was necessary because of her condition. He calls it a room for treating the mentally disturbed."

"But he lied to the police when he reported her missing. And what about attacking you with a knife?"

"He says he lied to save embarrassing her. As for Jack and me, he claims he thought we were intruders there to harm her."

"You didn't tell him who you were?"

"It hardly seemed like a time for formal introductions," I said wryly. "But don't worry, Sue, he'll be charged with something. We were there when he was released, you know. He smirked when he went by us. I was afraid Jack was going to go for him, he was so furious."

"It's wrong, Bram. You know it's wrong."

"Sure, but nobody asked me. At least it made a great story, so I'm halfway back in Ben Goldsmith's good graces. He says I was on dangerous ground, though, breaking in that way. The paper wouldn't have been able to stand behind me, he said. One other good thing, Victoria Vandaleen is getting the treatment she needs, and not at her husband's clinic."

I paused long enough for a laconic laugh. "Now I think Jack Eddy's mad at me."

"He is? Why?"

"I razed him about solving the case of a woman disappearing, but not the one he was being paid to work on."

"Good," said Sue, as indignant as ever. "I hope he stays that way. Maybe then he'll let you alone instead of always dragging you into ridiculous situations like he does."

Sue Baney's hopes were in vain. I had just returned from lunch the next day when Jack Eddy came striding into the city room, cocky as ever. After stopping a minute to joke around with Goldsmith, he came over and perched on the edge of my desk. He began swinging one leg back and forth, making the scissors chatter against the wood and causing my pastepot to jump around. I said, "Cut it out, Jack."

He went right ahead swinging the leg. "Tell me, buddy," he said, "if you were going to assume a new identity, what's the first thing you'd do?"

"Assume a new identity? Why would I want to do a thing like that?"

"Snap out of it, will you? I'm speaking figuratively. Anyway, the first thing you'd do is acquire the necessary papers, right? Social Security card, driver's license, birth certifi-

cate, open a bank account, get personalized checks."

"Is this some kind of game, Jack? What are you driving at?"

He forged ahead, ignoring my question. "The first step, and the only real challenge, is the birth certificate. Once you've got that, the rest comes easy. So what does a pro do? Checks the birth and death announcements, or takes a leisurely stroll through a cemetery. It's an old trick, buddy, and close to being foolproof."

"You mean finding someone the right age who died as a child, then getting a certified copy of the person's birth certificate. Simple enough, but I still don't get the point."

"I'm playing a hunch, buddy, but I'm willing to back it with a hundred clams. Want to take me up on it?"

"Jack, you know I don't have a hundred bucks. If I did, I wouldn't risk it betting either for or against one of your crazy schemes. Come on, tell me what's on your mind."

"That screwball sawbones killed Vera Slotnik. Maybe accidentally, maybe not. A doc has one advantage over the average murderer because he can sign a death certificate. Then all he needs to do is make his victim anonymous. Fake an identity, make funeral ar-

rangements, tell the mortician the stiff has no family or friends so out of the goodness of his heart he'll foot the bill for burial himself. And then one final thing, stage a disappearance using the victim's real identity."

"And you think that's what happened to Vera Slotnik?"

"No question about it in my mind, friend. The only one who saw the woman posing as Vera had never seen her before." He took a letter from his jacket pocket and dropped it on the desk. "Here's the clincher. I mailed the photo to the desk clerk at Buckeye Lake, and he says it's not even close to the woman who registered as Vera. The one he saw was a good ten years older, maybe more, and a real dog. Nothing about the woman's features was similar to Vera's, but doesn't her description ring a bell?"

"Miss Flagg, Vandaleen's head nurse." After skimming over the clerk's letter and taking a long look at the picture of Vera that was with it I said, "So now what, Jack?"

"Either go to the courthouse and start checking death records or run through the *Times-Press* obituary pages for July. Since we're here, let's try that first, buddy. It should be more fun anyhow."

\*

After reading through the third obit page of the papers on my side of the counter I said, "Funny, I never really noticed how many people die every day. So far no likely prospects, Jack. Not many women of thirty are checking out."

"Be odd if they were, mate. Keep reading."

I did, still not finding anything of interest. The job was making me drowsy, but I jerked full-awake when Jack cried, "Aha!"

"Found something I presume."

"Could be what I'm looking for, buddy. But don't stop, check the rest of the papers."

Jack was on his last page when I finished and went around the counter to look at the one he'd laid aside. The obit was brief and to the point. An Alice Strange-field, thirty, a resident of Akron, had died suddenly on July twenty-seventh. No survivors. Arrangements by Morley Funeral Home, no calling hours, burial in East Akron Cemetery.

Jack pushed his last paper aside and said, "Let's head for the courthouse, friend."

"I've got to put this stuff away, Jack. And I have a couple of stories to write for tomorrow, so you go ahead."

"Okay, I'll buzz you when I finish."

Only twenty minutes passed before he did. "Want to make a quick run down to Canton with me, buddy? Like I figured, the death certificate was signed by Doc Vandaleen, and it says Stark County is where Alice Strange-field was born."

"I can't get away, Jack. Goldsmith's been watching me like a hawk. He knows what I'm working on, and he'll go through the roof if I walk out without giving it to him."

"Really got yourself in a jam, didn't you? Okay, I'll go on down, buddy, then see you at dinner."

I was waiting in the living room when he parked the Auburn in front of the boarding-house. From the way he came up the porch steps two at a time it was obvious he had found something. I had the front door already open for him.

"Bingo, friend," he said when we were inside and he could see no one else within hearing range. "The only Alice Strange-field ever born in Canton died in 1907 when she was three days old."

I gave a low whistle and sat down. "So you were right. Then Vera Slotnik must be in the grave down the street."

"You can bet your bankroll on it, buddy."

"What now?"

"Unless you want to do some digging tonight, we've gone as far as we can without a court order. After dinner we find Plato Largis, lay it out for him, and let him talk to a judge in the morning. Then we exhume the body, and Largis can lay a murder rap on Vandaleen. I want to be there, buddy. I want to see that smirk wiped off his face."

Jack Eddy had that pleasure, but I was busy elsewhere. All hell had broken loose in Akron. Overnight the first snowfall of the season, a mere two inches, had caused havoc on the streets. Three had died, others were dying, cars were smashed up all over the county. How could it be that in seven months people forgot how to drive on snow?

On top of that, the workers at all three Goodyear plants went on strike. The company was laying off sixteen hundred employees and didn't intend to recognize plant-wide seniority. There were no picket lines and no violence, yet in a classic example of overreacting, Governor Martin L. Davey had mobilized the National Guard. Fortunately he had enough sense to keep them in northwest Ohio rather than sending them to Akron.

But it was writing the story of a seventy-five-year-old man hanging himself that got me down. His wife had died during the summer, so he lived alone in a dingy house on East Cedar only a block from the *Times-Press* building. At ten o'clock that morning the sheriff was to have conducted a foreclosure sale on the house, but as the neighbors said, the elderly man beat him to the punch. I knew him by sight. He had tried without success to eke out a living selling bus checks on the downtown sidewalks.

Fortunately the story of the exhumation and the later arrest of Dr. Vandaleen and Emma Flagg came too late for the Friday editions. There is just so much running around and pecking at a typewriter a man can do in one day. And it was fortunate, too, that Jack Eddy provided me with information that was missing from the Saturday story in the rival *Beacon Journal*. I was Goldsmith's fairhaired boy again.

My fingers were still numb from the cold after having watched West High beat Central for the city championship at Old Forge Field during the afternoon, so I fumbled around in my pocket for a while before locating a nickel. Once I had, I got up and went to the jukebox.



After scanning the selections I looked back to Sue Baney and said, "You like that new Dorsey tune 'The Dipsy Doodle'?"

"Love it," she said. "And play 'Vieni Vieni,' too, but make sure it's Rudy Vallee and not one of those others."

I rummaged through my stuff for another nickel.

When the music began playing, Sue rocked on her chair to the beat of Tommy Dorsey's rhythm, then suddenly arose saying, "Come on, Bram, let's dance."

I looked around at the others in the little downtown hamburger stand on High Street just south of Market. "Aw, Sue, nobody ever dances at the Kewpee Hotel."

"All right, then I'll dance by myself." And she did. People turned to watch, most of them smiling. I stood up, feeling sheepish, knowing the color was rising on my cheeks. We finished the "The Dipsy Doodle," then much to my relief our food arrived before Vallee really got started.

Over coffee Sue said, "I read your story." She shuddered a little. "I can't believe things like that actually happen. What could have been in those people's minds? And that poor woman . . ."

"They'll pay for it. The one good thing is the doctors say

Victoria Vandaleen will be okay."

"She'll never be the same, Bram. No one could be. At least the children will have their mother back, though."

"They'll need all the love and support they can get. Their father's headed for the electric chair, and other kids will be rough on them. They're up at their aunt's place in Michigan now, and I imagine their mother'll keep them there. Even so, the word'll get around."

"Has Dr. Vandaleen confessed?"

"Not on your life, Sue. That bird never will. But the prosecutor made some kind of deal with the Flagg woman, and she spilled her guts."

"Really, Bram, do you have to use expressions like that? Sometimes you're getting to sound as bad as Jack Eddy. I guess I should be thankful you didn't call her a broad like he would have."

I curbed a smile before it got started. "Emma Flagg was more than Vandaleen's head nurse. At least she expected to be once they were rid of Victoria for good. She's tough on the surface but fell to pieces when she heard talk about the electric chair. Her testimony will put Vandaleen in it."

Sue's head was shaking. "Such people. One thing your story didn't do was give a reason for locking Victoria up the way they did."

"My second-day story will. She had never approved of her husband's performing abortions, and then she began suspecting that other things were going on at the clinic. At breakfast that morning she confronted him for the umpteenth time, then threatened to blow the whistle. The doc slapped her around, but for the first time she fought back. He knocked her cold, gave her a shot of something to keep her under, and drove her to the clinic. Emma Flagg was already involved in the things going on there. She had no love for Victoria, so she was a willing accomplice. But it had all happened on the spur of the moment. Before they could decide how to dispose of Victoria in the safest way possible, the sister arrived in town and really stirred the pot. After that they were afraid to do anything until it quieted down."

Sue shook her head, shivering involuntarily. "The most horrible part of all was that business about experimenting on people. Was it true?"

"Maybe it'll come out later, but they hadn't with Vera Slotnik. She was the guinea pig for

testing the method of disposing of a body. It was all set up ahead of time, and they were just waiting for the right woman to come along. They didn't want to start with Victoria for several reasons. For one, the mortician might have recognized her body if they didn't allow time to half starve her, turn her into nothing much but a skeleton.

"Then, once Vera was under, they just kept pumping the ether to her. After that Vandaleen did the paperwork and called a funeral home. The Flagg woman picked up Vera's clothes while the landlady was out. She copied Vera's handwriting for the note and on the letter and postcard to the brother. Forged her signature on checks, too."

"It's all too terrible to think about. Will Ben Goldsmith quit picking on you now?"

"He wasn't picking on me, Sue. I had it coming. I used lousy judgment, and I wouldn't have blamed him if he'd fired me. I learned a lesson, believe me."

After a lengthy silence Sue laid her hand on mine and gave me a little smile. "Bram, let's go to East Market Gardens and dance instead of going to the show. I don't feel like just sitting."

Neither did I. But I was in an expansive mood so I said, "I've got a better idea. They're opening the new Hawaiian Room at the Mayflower Hotel tonight, so we'll go there and dance."

"Won't it be expensive?"

"Sure, but who cares?" I didn't tell her that in view of all that had developed Goldsmith had changed his mind and was paying me overtime for the trip to Buckeye Lake.

Several hours later when I parked up the street from the

boardinghouse I still wasn't ready to settle down for the night. I turned up the collar of my overcoat and walked to the corner of Willard, then stood a moment or two staring across the street at East Akron Cemetery. Was Vera Slotnik resting easier in her grave now that the truth was known? If nothing else, in a few days she would have a new tombstone with her own name on it. Did it matter? I wasn't sure.

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*(continued from page 4)*

husband, and has won an honorable mention in our Mysterious Photograph contest.

Speaking of awards . . . we are delighted to announce that two AHMM stories—Jacklyn Butler's "The Messenger" (Oc-

tober, 1992) and Jeremiah Healy's "Rest Stop" (May, 1992)—are nominees for the Shamus Award, given by the Private Eye Writers of America, for Best P.I. Short Story of 1992. Congratulations to both!

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the December issue*

All six cowhands of the Rocking-H ranch sat around the campfire after a hard day in the saddle. They were known to one another by their monickers—Arky, Bama, Creole, Denver, El Paso, and Fargo. Nearby, their tethered horses grazed quietly—two blacks, two whites, and two roans. As the coffee slowly cooled in their tin cups, talk centered first on their big horse trade a week ago. After swapping horses with one another, each cowhand thought he got the best of the deal, although Creole said that somehow that couldn't be right.

Then, as the campfire turned to red coals, the conversation turned to the holdup of the Bloody Gulch bank last year, and the lone bandit who eluded the posse and was still at large with the \$25,000. This topic made at least two of the cowboys nervous, although they tried not to show it. For actually one of them was the bandit and one was the sheriff in disguise.

- (1) In the trade, each cowhand got a horse of another color.
- (2) Creole and El Paso had horses of the same color at the time of the robbery. Now, after the trade, they again have horses of the same color (but, of course, a different color from before). However, neither has ever had a horse the color of the sheriff's present mount.
- (3) The new owner of Ike formerly had a roan horse, whereas the new owner of Joker (who is not Bama) formerly had a black horse.
- (4) Arky prefers his present roan horse to his former white one.

- (5) Denver was glad to part with Kicker and get his present white horse.
- (6) Neither Bama nor Fargo ever owned Handy or Lucky.
- (7) Golly was the getaway horse at the robbery. It was never owned by El Paso, and was not traded for Kicker.
- (8) Handy is not a roan, and does not now belong to the sheriff.

Suddenly, pulling out his badge with one hand and his six-gun with the other, the sheriff said loudly, "Get yore hands up! Yo're under arrest fer the Bloody Gulch bank robbery."

*Who arrested whom?*

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See page 141 for the solution to the October puzzle.

FICTION

# Rapture

by Wendy Almeida

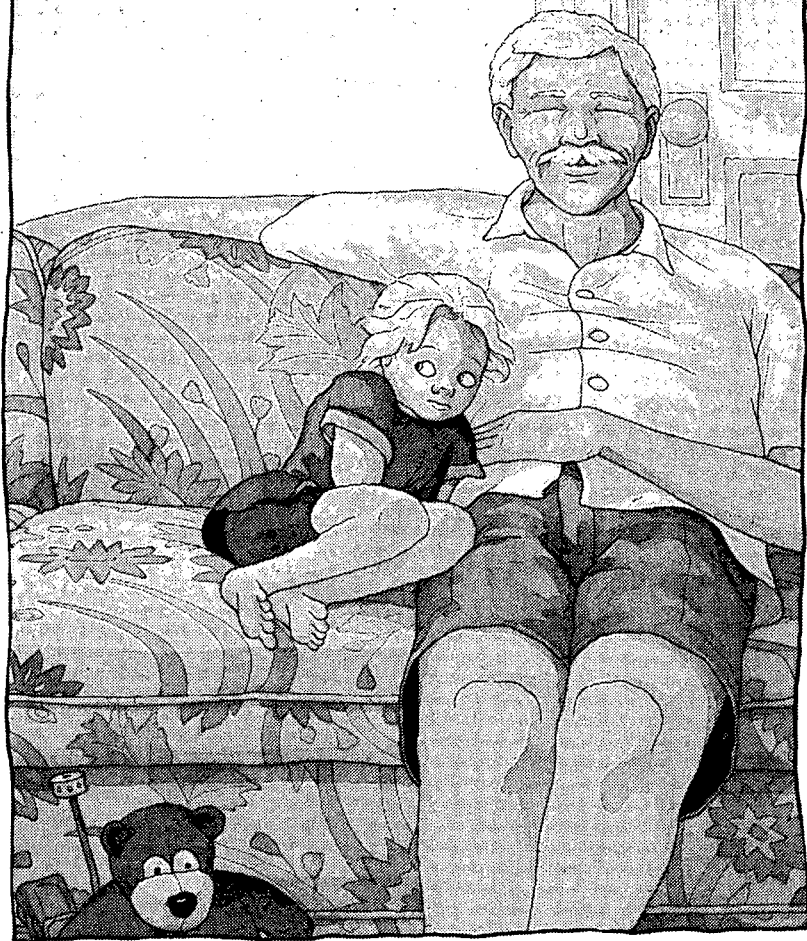


Illustration by Jim Adams

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**T**hey called it Rapture.

"Do you know what Rapture is?" Mommy asked one time. She was talking to Daddy, not me, so I kept quiet and moved my peas around on my plate to make it look like I'd eaten some.

"Of course," Daddy said. "It's what I experience on Saturday nights. Sometimes Wednesdays, too, if I'm lucky."

Daddy was smiling. I love it when my daddy smiles. His mustache smiles, too, and his eyes get shiny. When my daddy smiles I feel like dancing.

"That's not what I'm talking about, Dennis. I'm talking about those signs—'Rapture is coming.' They're all over the place downtown."

Downtown is where Mommy goes to work, but it isn't the same as town. To town is where we go when Daddy forgets to buy milk or bread at the grocery store. Downtown is far away. When Mommy goes there, she gets dressed up and she's gone all day.

Daddy was talking again. "It's probably a promo for a movie, Thea—or for Madonna's latest video. They'll build up your curiosity for a few weeks, then reach for your wallet."

"I suppose. Karen, the only way there are going to be fewer peas on your plate is if you put some in your mouth. Stop playing and eat."

That was all they said. But next day or a week they talked about Rapture again. Daddy cooked that time, so there were no peas. Daddy cooks the things I like. Sometimes he puts the food on the plate so it's a smiling face and once he made blue potatoes. I liked them, but Mommy said, "Dennis, that's disgusting," and he didn't do it again.

Mommy talked first. "I found out what Rapture is today."

"So that's what you and your boss were doing. And here I sat thinking you were working late."

"Dennis, you're terrible." I looked at her, but she was smiling. "Rapture is the end of the world, at least according to some religious cult."

I stopped eating. How could the world end? When my stories or tapes end, they go in the bookcase until another time. But where would the world go?

Mommy explained more. "The end of the world for some people, anyway. When Rapture comes, the good people are separated from the bad. The good ones are taken off somewhere, and the bad ones stay right where they are."



"I see. Instant population control."

Mommy leaned over and put her elbows on the table like I'm not supposed to. "I guess there's one person in this family who's not going anywhere."

"You can count on that, Thea. After all, someone's got to take care of all the women who are left behind."

"You're bad, Dennis. You are really bad."

Daddy laughed and they looked at each other the way they do sometimes, like they have a secret.

Later Daddy told me the story about the pale green pants with nobody inside them. He made up a new funny voice for when the pants cry, and I laughed hard. But after he left, I didn't go to sleep. Instead, I thought.

Rapture was coming.

Rapture was taking the good people and leaving the bad ones behind.

Mommy said Daddy was bad.

What if Rapture was listening?

Then I couldn't sleep, and Daddy heard me moving around. He brought me a glass of water.

"You're good, Daddy. You're so good." I said it loud so Rapture would hear, but Daddy said, "Good! I'm not good. I'm the big, bad wolf." He made his wolf face and pretended to eat me, but I didn't laugh.

"No, really Daddy. You're good."

"All right, Karen. I'm good. I'm very, very good. But when I'm bad—I'm horrid."

After that I worried all the time. Because I'm good. Everybody says so. Mrs. White next door, and my teacher, and Uncle Howard. Everybody. I was good, and Daddy was bad. And Rapture was coming to take the good people away and leave the bad ones behind.

I didn't care if I went someplace else, I like visiting new places. Except I wanted to be with Daddy. I love my daddy. He smells good and he makes story people talk the right way, not plain like Mommy, and sometimes he lifts me high in the air and spins me around until I can hardly breathe and Mommy says to stop making me dizzy. But I like being dizzy and I love my daddy and I don't want him to be left behind when Rapture comes.

The very next day Daddy showed me the new garage the men were building so Daddy could move his office to the old garage and I could have Daddy's office for my playroom. It didn't look like a



garage except for the door. There were no rakes and snow shovels on the walls and no lawn mower in the corner. It was all clean and empty except for Daddy and me.

"Isn't this great, pumpkin? It's attached right to the house so my favorite little sugar plum won't melt when it rains."

"But what if something gets in?" I was thinking about Rapture, but Daddy didn't understand.

"Don't worry, Karen, burglars won't get in. Look—" Daddy banged on the door to the house. Then he banged on the garage door and pretended to hurt his hand. "Two strong doors. And there's a lock right here—see? You turn it like this so you don't have to worry about the bad guys getting in. Besides, after we're through paying for this thing, we'll have left nothing to steal."

"Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Can somebody be bad and then be good?"

"Sure they can, sweetheart. Look at the Grinch."

"But what about the bad things he did before he was good?"

Daddy laughed. "Well, Karen, if you insist on being absolutely precise, you'd have to say he's a good Grinch who used to do bad things. Come on, seriouspuss, let's see if some cookies and milk will cheer you up."

But I didn't want cookies and I didn't want milk. I wanted to be with my daddy. But even if Daddy tried to be good, he'd always be a good person who used to do bad things, and what if Rapture remembered, like Santa Claus or God?

Then I thought something that made me feel all funny inside, like when Daddy teaches me a cartwheel or tumblersauce and I want to do it and don't want to all at the same time. There was a way to make sure I could stay with Daddy. I could be bad. Daddy couldn't be good, but I could be bad.

So I was bad. Muffins was sleeping on the couch, and I grabbed her tail and squeezed real hard. I know I was bad because I hurt her and she cried and got mad at me. But Daddy didn't get mad. He just put stingy stuff on my scratches, and said, "Maybe now you understand why it's not a good idea to tease the cat."

I tried harder. I didn't eat my vegetables, and I didn't put my toys away, and at school when Mrs. Fisher told us to quiet down I kept talking. I did everything I could think of to be bad, but they wouldn't say it so Rapture would hear. Mrs. Fisher said, "Karen, I don't know what's gotten into you lately," and Mommy felt my

head and asked me if I was feeling all right. I said I was, but really I lied because I had to be bad before Rapture came.

I wanted to know when, but Mommy and Daddy always talk about things and if I ask questions, they stop, so I couldn't ask.

I couldn't ask, but I could listen. I listened really hard, and finally I found out. Mommy was washing dishes after dinner, and Daddy came up behind her and hugged her and said, "How about a little Rapture?" He said it quiet, but I heard and made myself still and small so they wouldn't know I was there.

"It's a little too early, Dennis, don't you think?" Mommy looked right at me, then back at Daddy. Then she laughed and said, "Besides, Rapture isn't coming for another week. You have seven days to wait, dear."

So then I knew. One week. Seven days.

The next day at school I hit Tommy with the Cookie Monster doll. Mrs. Fisher made me sit in the time out chair, and when Daddy came to get me, they talked and I know they were talking about how bad I was.

Later, when he tucked me in, Daddy said, "Karen, why did you hit Tommy today?"

"Because I'm bad. I'm really really bad."

"Sweetheart, you're not bad. You couldn't be bad if you tried."

But I had to be. I had to be bad. I had to be really bad because Rapture was coming. In six days Rapture was coming to take me away from my daddy.

I did more bad things. I played the TV loud so Mommy came running. I drew on the walls with my crayons. They saw I was being bad, but they wouldn't say so. Daddy said I was going through the terrible twos a few years late, and Mommy said she was going to take me to see Dr. Carter. I did everything I could think of to be bad, but nobody said I was and it was five days then four then three then two then one.

One day left to be bad. At breakfast I didn't eat and Mommy said I didn't look well so they decided I should stay home with Daddy. Mommy got dressed up and came into the kitchen where Daddy and me were watching *Road Runner*. Daddy was laughing hard like he always does when Coyote gets squished.

"Dennis, let me show you how to work the remote control for the garage door before I leave."

Daddy kept watching. *Road Runner* was getting ready to push a big rock onto Coyote.

"I know how it works, Thea. You press a button, the door opens."

"There's a little more to it than that."

"Right. You press another button and it closes." The stone fell and Coyote got all flat and Dad laughed.

"Dennis."

Daddy looked up. "You can show me later. If I have any questions before you come home, I'll read the instructions, okay?"

"You've never read a set of instructions in your life."

"Not true, Thea." Daddy got up and put his hands on Mommy's shoulders and looked at her. "I read the owner's manual that came along with you. Learned how to press all the right buttons pretty well, didn't I?"

"Owner's manual?"

"All right, all right, I'll be good."

I wanted to holler at Daddy that it was too late for him to be good and if he'd only let me be bad I could stop Rapture from taking me away from him, but he was busy kissing Mommy.

Then Mommy's carpool came. "I've got to go. Bye-bye, Karen, be good. Dennis, if she feels better later, will you take the car to the mechanic? It's making that weird sound again."

And then Mommy was gone and it was just Daddy and me and it was hard to think about being bad because my very favorite thing is to be with Daddy and have fun. But I did still try. We played a puzzle game, and I threw the pieces on the floor. But all that happened was Daddy was bad, too. He said let's throw things on the floor was his favorite game, too, and then he started throwing things and I laughed and then I forgot about being bad for a while.

Later Daddy and me went into the new garage so he could check the car. Daddy opened the door to the outside with the remote. "See? Just like the TV, Karen. And Mommy thinks I'm not mechanical."

Daddy had on only shorts, no shoes even. Mommy would holler about walking in the garage with no shoes, but Daddy didn't care. My daddy has funny curly hair on his chest and legs, and he says if I eat my broccoli I'll get some, too, but Mommy says I won't. I looked at Daddy's curly hairs and his mustache and I thought about how I wouldn't see him ever again after Rapture came and I hugged his leg real hard and wouldn't let go.

"What's this? Oh my, I've got a gremlin attached to my leg." He started to walk around with me still holding on. He turned on the

car, then he opened up the hood and looked in.

"What's wrong with it, Daddy?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I'm only doing this because it's what the mechanics always do. No, wait a minute—I see! There's a problem with the thingamajiggle." He held out his hand to me. "That will be three thousand, one million dollars, ma'am."

Then the phone rang, and Daddy put down the hood. "Come inside while I answer the phone."

But I didn't. I stayed behind and got into the car and looked at all the things. This was my chance. Driving away in the car was badder than anything else I could think of. I put my foot on the pedal that makes the car go and then I pushed and the car made a loud sound and I got scared because what if I wanted to stop and couldn't? What if Muffins ran in front—or Daddy—and I couldn't stop? I started to cry then because I was too scared to be bad and when Rapture took me away from Daddy, it would be my fault.

I got out of the car and I could have been bad again, but I forgot and I locked the door behind me like I was supposed to. I wanted to get back in, but none of the doors would open. I tried the remote, except it made the garage door close instead and it was so dark I got scared again and went inside.

Daddy was talking to Mommy. They see each other every day so I don't know why they talk so much, but they do. I tried to start the TV with the garage remote, but Daddy was wrong, they weren't the same. So I just sat and waited. After a real long time Daddy finally stopped talking and came into the kitchen. Then he said a bad word and ran into the garage.

"Daddy, quiet—Rapture will hear!" I went in after him. He was trying to open the car door and he must have heard me because he didn't say the word again, just—

"Karen, be a good girl and get me the set of keys hanging from the bulletin board. And turn on the light so I can find the remote."

I went inside. I closed the door. Then I turned the lock just like Daddy showed me.

I hope I'm safe from Rapture now. Except I don't know when to open the door and let Daddy out. How long do I have to wait before I'm really bad?

# THE BEST OF THE LOWLIFE GRIFTERS AND SWINDLERS

Edited by Cynthia Manson

## GRIFTERS AND SWINDLERS

STORIES BY

JIM THOMPSON • DAVID MORRELL  
JULIAN SYMONS • SIMON BRETT  
AND DONALD E. WESTLAKE,  
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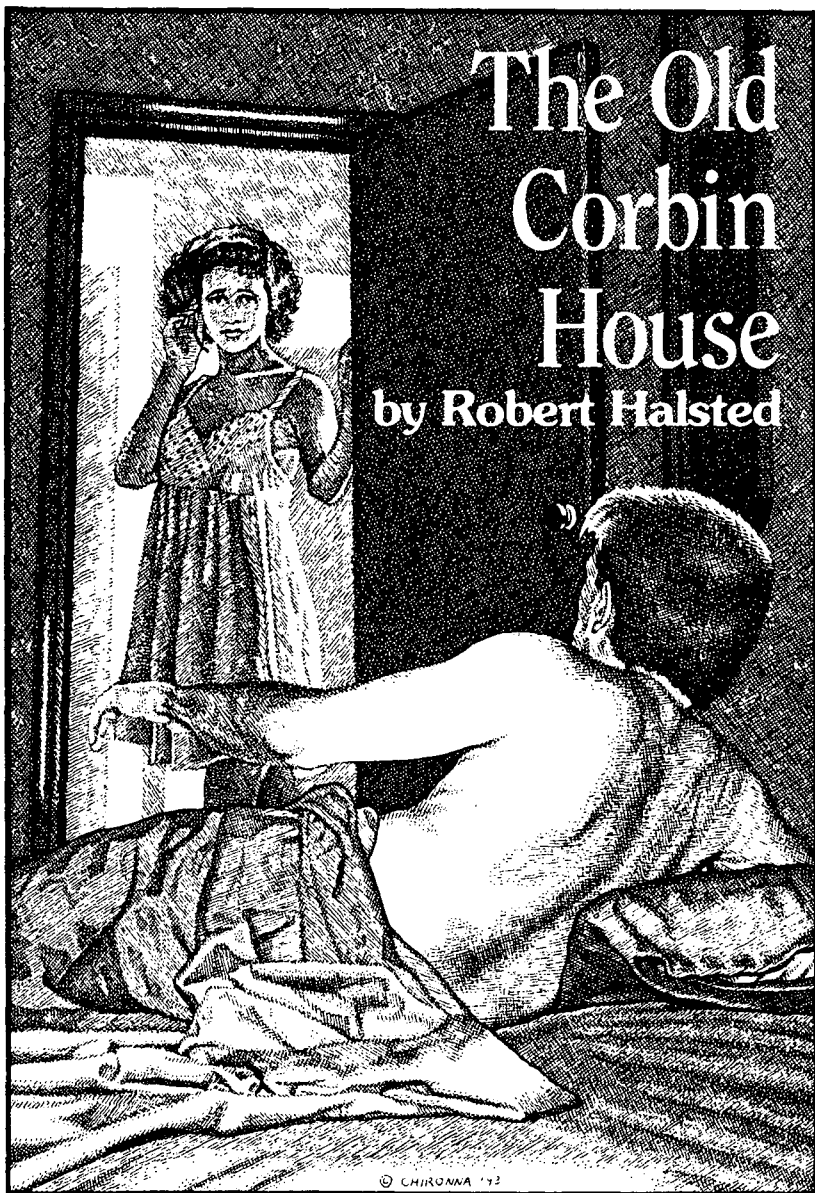
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FICTION

# The Old Corbin House

by Robert Halsted



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Illustration by Ron Chironna

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I sat in the Dixie Diner, maintaining the turbidity of my lukewarm coffee by slowly stirring the sediment up from the bottom. Real greasy-spoon coffee is one of the bits of Americana we still have in Greenvale. I looked at my watch again. Three fifteen.

Finally Father Richards' old red Toyota crackled into the gravel parking space beside my old grey Mercedes. I shoved a couple of quarters at the counterman and went out to meet him. "I hope this doesn't take long," he said. "Mary promised to kick me out of the house if I'm late for supper again."

"Well, maybe if you'd get here on time—"

"Nag, nag. You're as bad as Mary."

"You've lived through forty years of her nagging—mine shouldn't bother you in small doses."

We decided to leave his car there and go in mine, with him navigating from directions scribbled on the back of a piece of church stationery. I trusted his navigation more than I trusted his driving.

"'Out Redland Road three point five miles from the city limits,'" he said. I tripped the odometer and added a mental half mile to the string of fresh zeros.

"Now, exactly what's required of me, Father? All the rector said on the phone was, 'Take a look at the place.' I never even knew it existed."

"You've been in the real estate business in this town for five years and you've never heard of it?"

"I have a license. I buy and sell a little. Basically I collect restorable properties. In town, Northside, West End. I don't know this part of the county. But back to the point, what do you want me to do?"

"Make an appraisal. Tell us what it's worth."

"I'm not a qualified appraiser. I can tell you what I'd offer, what I'd ask. But I thought the parish was going to keep it. For a rectory or parochial school or something."

"They talked about it. But Himself is too high and mighty to live on the landfill road, and there's the Catholic and the Lutheran and the Methodist schools already in business. I don't think the vestry would go along with it."

God, parish politics. "It's a good two miles from the landfill, if those directions are right, and it's on five acres, according to what he said. Anyhow, we're almost to three point five miles. Where from there?"

"Mmm. It says here, 'Turn left on unnamed gravel road



that has Plants and Veggies for Sale sign on it.”

I crept along till I saw the sign, signaled, and turned up the gravel road. “Now where?”

Father Richards ran his finger down the scribbled directions. “Go one quarter mile to falling-down white rail fence. Turn in gravel drive. Key in mailbox at front door.”

We passed the little home-based plants and vegetables place, found the fence, and I turned a little way into the drive. Farther along it was blocked by overgrowth, so I stopped near the entry.

Father shook his head. “I don’t think this will ever do.”

“Well, we’ve come this far. Let’s take a look.”

The lawn was nothing but knee-high fescue between shrubbery turned into jungle. We fought and sidled our way toward the front of the house.

The front door was recessed between projecting wings, forming a forecourt that had been turned into more a patio or atrium by the encroaching fourth wall of shrubbery.

My restorer’s eye liked it, though Father Richards seemed to be fighting back a reaction of horror. The house was built of local bricks, more beige than red—I sometimes think I settled in Greenvale for the color of its brick houses—with

a matching tile roof. The house was probably considered very modern when it was built, in the forties at a skilled guess, but it didn’t belong to any particular period. The wide entry wall was basically glass, framed in wood that had last been painted white circa 1960. Most of the old linseed-based paint had flaked off the still solid yellow pine. A good scraping and the right latex primer would fix that. A couple of the many glass panes were cracked, but surprisingly none was broken out.

“Well, don’t just stand there gaping. Get the key.”

“I thought this was your project, Father.”

“You know I don’t like snakes.”

I worked my way toward the front door. A tall, drooping pyracantha snagged me just as I got to the letterbox. I unhooked myself, opened the box, and looked in. In the gloomy light it was hard to see, but I thought I made out the ghostly corroded outline of a key. The key itself definitely wasn’t there. I tried the door, but it was locked.

The priest had cautiously come up beside me. We both looked in. The inside was mostly dust and cobwebs. The curtains were in shreds, and various trashy material had sifted down onto the floor.



"God, what a mess," said Father Richards. "We could build a place cheaper than we could clean this one up."

For some reason I had a sudden impulse to defend the place. "It looks structurally sound," I protested. "Obviously the yard needs work, but there are some fine old trees here, and some valuable shrubs—you just couldn't *buy* azaleas and camellias like those."

"Hmph."

"Well, let's circumambulate the place."

He snorted again. "*You* circumambulate. I'm going back to the car, if I can find my way through this trackless jungle."

"You're not twenty yards from the car right now. I'll just take a quick look around."

"Don't take too long."

I followed the brick walk around the house as best I could. The outer wall was mostly glass, forming a shell or peripheral hallway around most of the interior rooms. It looked like a really original design. There was a porte-cochère on the side, and a freestanding garage with a covered walkway beyond that. Through its almost opaque windows I thought I saw a restorable '57 DeSoto and beside the building was a motorbike weathered into a mouldering heap, ragweed and

pokeberries growing up through it.

The back wall of the house overlooked a broad, stepped terrace and was almost a mirror image of the front. I put my face up against the glass and saw through a wide living and dining area all the way to the front door.

And at the same time I saw—or thought I saw—a figure move quickly out of sight.

I'd tried every door I'd come to, and now I tried the two pairs opening onto the terrace. Like the others, firmly locked.

I took less time going back around to the car. I found one more side entrance and tried it. Whoever was in there was locked in. I squeezed between a forsythia and a very prickly japonica, rounded the corner of the house, and worked my way back to the car.

"Well, you took long enough."

"Hush, Father. It's not even five yet."

For some reason I didn't want to tell him about the disappearing figure, so I didn't. In a way I wasn't even outwardly sure I'd seen it, though *inwardly* I was.

The house had some hold on me. I didn't want it to get away. Back on Redland Road, I said: "That wouldn't be a bad school building at all, Father."

"So buy it and open a school."

That gave me an opening for questions. "Does the parish actually own it, or are they thinking of buying it, or . . . I didn't quite understand what you were saying about that."

"Don't understand it myself. The reverend rector told me to get you to check it out; he said we'd inherited it but not quite for sure."

"That helps a lot. Does anybody know anything for sure?"

"You'll have to ask Father. I'm just a hired hand."

Over the next couple of days I played telephone tag with the rector and finally tracked him down between Kiwanis, deanery meetings, and holding the hands of wealthy parishioners. He didn't know much either, but referred me to the parish lawyer. Who didn't do the work as a tithe but was on a retainer, of which he kicked back ten percent to the parish. So much for starving Episcopalians. I wondered if I should bill for my services, too, but decided it would look shabby and petty.

Brett Simonds was much more informative than any of the clergy had been.

All Angels' Parish had been the residuary legatee under Oswald Corbin's will. The whole

family had died in a car crash in the early sixties, and the estate was still unresolved after thirty years.

The first seven years were spent awaiting a presumption of death for one of the Corbin children, whose body wasn't found, or at least wasn't identified, in the road wreckage.

Then there was a western branch of the family who were next in line. A three-year search, then another seven years for presumptive death when none of them could be located in living condition: Richard, the brother, had died in a VA hospital, and a professional searcher failed to locate a widow or descendants.

The next thirteen years were apparently spent in the dusty files of some California lawyer. Anybody in Greenvale who'd been interested would have assumed the California heirs had received title. All this time the taxes on the property had been paid from the liquid assets of the estate, now all evaporated, so Green County had never been involved. It was when the money ran out that the California lawyer decided to pass the by now decidedly cold potato back east.

"So now all the other heirs are missing and presumed dead, and it belongs to the parish," I said, or asked.

"Well, not really. All Angels' is, you might say, the heir apparent, or, since all the other heirs are presumptively dead, the heir presumptive. But if ever, henceforth ad infinitum, and so forth, any lineal descendant of old Oswald Corbin should appear on the scene, title would immediately, upon proof, revert to him, her, them, or it."

"So the place is orphaned, for practical purposes." He nodded. "Well, if, say, the parish restored the place, would the costs count as a mechanic's lien?"

"Uh-uh. Not unless you went to the graveyard and got a contract for the job. And if you were going to do that, you might as well get a warranty deed." He giggled, unbecomingly for a pompous small town lawyer. "Law of *mortmain*, y'know." He giggled again.

I overlooked that. The dead hand of his humor was enough without bringing in the dead hand of law language. "So a warranty deed's an impossibility."

"Yeah, but I could get you a quitclaim cheap . . . Lloyd's might insure the title. No American title company would."

"One reason I'm asking—I think it'd make a great school,

but frankly I'm interested in the place myself."

His eyebrows went up. "Well, since we don't have legal gambling in this state . . . may I ask *why*?"

"Sure, you can ask. I dunno. I just *like* the place. I hear it calling to me."

He knitted his brows. "I won't even bill you for this advice. Bribe the vestry not to pay taxes for three years, then bid on it when the county takes it over."

"Don't want to wait that long." I gave in to impulse. "Since I've become an interested party, I probably shouldn't report directly to the vestry. You convey 'em my offer: I'll restore it, barebones, all structural work and exterior paint, no interior decoration, for twenty-five grand. Or I'll pay ten for a quitclaim deed, along with your detailed affidavit about the search for heirs, and so on. Or I'll give forty for a warranty deed, condition as is."

He shook his head, not for the first time. "You'll never get that. But I think you ought to start scraping up ten grand. I think under the circumstances they'll find it irresistible."

"Oh," I interrupted myself as I was leaving. "As a parish member, unpaid consultant, or potential buyer, could I have

access to the interior pending the next vestry meeting?"

"Sure. Any or all of the above."

"Do you have the key?"

"Uh-uh, I couldn't find it either. . . . Hey, did you notice there's been practically no vandalism?"

"Yeah. That struck me as very strange."

"Only one reason I can think of that kids would stay away from a place with all that glass to break."

"Yeah." The hair on the back of my neck was standing up as I walked out of his office.

**T**his time I went in the pickup, with tools enough to clear a path to the front door and the standard burglary equipment every landlord keeps on hand. I've never had to break a lock, except for one deadbolt a tenant installed.

I was less like a kid with a new toy than one with a big brown parcel from a mailorder house. Not quite sure what's there, but expecting delightful surprises. I trimmed the worst of the branches on the way to the door, put the toolbox down on the front step, and was just opening it when I saw the girl inside.

I waved, a whole-arm wave like a railroad brakeman, and

called, "You in there! Girl!" I don't think I'd ever addressed anyone just that way before.

She glanced over her shoulder at me and disappeared into an inner room.

"Just like that, huh?" I said half aloud, frustrated and irritated. I was preparing to start work on the lock when she reappeared and came to the door, smiling.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Won't you come in?"

Talk about off balance. "Ah, uh—thank you." She held the door wide, and I stepped in. "You really shouldn't just, uh, invite a stranger in like that these days. It isn't safe." If I'd found her in one of my rental units, I probably would have been reading her the Riot Act by then. One reason I didn't was that she was so ladylike.

"I'm not afraid. You look like a nice man." She gently pushed the door to. I hadn't been so *disarmed* since my last encounter with a maiden grand-aunt of my early childhood, whose velvet gloves concealed a great persuasiveness. "Come on into the den."

I followed her to the room she'd disappeared into earlier. She had a better than nice figure. Full calves and hips, slender waist and ankles. Her bare arms were as well shaped as her legs.

The room was clean and dusted, the furniture old and shabby but well kept and good quality to begin with. The walls were lined with books. She ordered me to a mellow old leather couch and seated herself on an oversized ottoman nearby.

"I, uh, understood the house was aband—ah, unoccupied," I began. I certainly wasn't as articulate as usual.

"We're squatters," she said, with no preamble or pretense. "That's why you'll have to forgive the . . . squalor. We *are* family, however."

I was so busy watching her I barely heard what she was saying. Brown hair, wide-set eyes of pale hazel or blue judging by the dim light, over nice cheekbones. Good small chin and full warm lips. Nice breasts, nothing blatant but just reassuringly feminine. Good hands but for the nibbled nails. Fair skin, on the verge of too pale.

"Miss, uh—"

"I'm sorry, I'm Mona Corbin. And you're . . ."

"Henry Freeman . . . ah, this is all very strange and awkward—"

"Yes, both ways, I'm sure." Then her serious mien turned to a warm smile, crinkled eye-corners, and the hint of a dimple. "But we forgive each other, don't we?"

"By all means. Thank you . . . what I was going to say, Miss Corbin—are you aware of the, uh, legal status of this house?"

"Not really. Would you explain it all to me?"

"Well, it's a long involved story . . ."

"Excuse me—would you like a cup of tea?"

I didn't really mind the interruption. She paid for each one with a fresh view of herself that somehow pleased me. "Yes, thank you."

While she was getting the tea, I snooped around the room. The furnishings were just what you'd expect of a house last occupied in 1960 or so. A 1961 calendar, in fact, on the wall, turned to April, I saw as I made the rounds. The books, all I could see, were no later than that, and most much earlier. Some had like-new dustjackets on them.

That was the jarring note: this room was clean, well dusted, lived-in, and belonged three decades back.

About then she came in with a little tea tray and put it on the coffee table before the couch.

"Not the best, I'm afraid," she apologized. "We're of *very* modest means right now."

That was when I consciously observed—though I already

had the evidence—that I was as smitten with the girl as with the house. Irrationally, though not without reason. What I wanted to say in response was something like, “Anything served by your sweet hands is ambrosia to me.” I didn’t, of course, say it. What came out of my mouth was, “I’m sure it’ll be fine, thank you.”

It really wasn’t fine, though I wouldn’t have said so. The Ritz crackers and gingersnaps were stale and clammy, the tea musty, as if brewed from a very old teabag. The label, in fact, was yellowish, I noticed when I squeezed the bag against the spoon. I got halfway through the cup before I abandoned it with what tactful subtlety I could muster.

“What I was starting to say, Mona—ah, Miss Corbin—”

“‘Mona’ is fine, Henry.” She crinkled another smile at me. “We *do* forgive each other, don’t we?”

“Yes.” I felt myself blushing. “The house.” I disciplined my mind, hardnosed softhearted softbrained slumlord that I was. “For thirty years this house has had no known owner . . .” I gave her a summary of what I had learned to date, and concluded with: “So, if you’re even a very distant relative, you should get in touch with an attorney immediately.

Frankly, I wanted to buy the house for myself—I like it—but that is a pointless procedure if there are living heirs.”

She leaned toward me and put her fingertips ever so lightly on my knee. “I think the best thing for you to do, Henry, is to go ahead with that legal procedure you talked about—the quitclaim deed from St. Whatsisname’s. All Angels’.”

“Well, but—if I put my capital and labor into it, and a claimant shows up, then I’m out of pocket what I’ve put into it, and more to the point, I’ve lost the house. Not that I really care too much who owns it. I’d love to fix it up and live here myself. It’s the kind of house I might’ve designed for myself, if I’d had the imagination, which I don’t. I’d hate, really hate, to see it bulldozed for a shopping mall or something. If I can’t have it myself, I’d like to see All Angels’ open a really first-rate school here, or the place restored to the family, somebody who’d love it and take care of it. But I don’t want to toss money down the drain and disappoint myself at the same time.”

I stopped for breath. “Look, Mona—if you’re even *distantly* related, and really like and want the house, well, I’ll go to bat for you. Do what I can to, you know, help you establish your claim and all.”

I was dying to ask her what exactly the family relationship was, but something held me back.

"I'll give your advice due consideration, Henry."

Hastily I scribbled Brett Simonds' name and phone number on the back of one of my own business cards. "Here's the lawyer who's handling it for All Angels'. That's me on the front side. Give him a call. If you have any questions, give *me* a call. Okay?" A sudden thought hit me, and as I was fumbling my cardcase back into my wallet—which wasn't where it came from—I managed to palm a twenty and slip it under the saucer. There was no doubt that they—who else plus Mona made "we?"—were in tight straits, but that would certainly cover a couple of phone calls and more contemporary teabags.

"All right, Henry." She stood up. I hadn't even noticed her clothing before—I don't see women's clothes unless they set off the woman herself—but she was dressed in pure Salvation Army—a demure blouse of uncertain vintage, a full pleated skirt that came well below the knees, ballerina flats with toe imprints on the cracked leather. "Would you like to see the rest of the house?"

"Very much. Yes, please."

She took my hand in her cool one and led me around the house. The entry flowed into large living and dining areas, with partitions of accordion-folded french doors, now folded back, to separate the spaces, and then on to the flagged terrace area. A house built for grand entertaining.

The house as a whole looked as if it had been left the way it was when the family died on the road. Which was pretty much what Brett Simonds had said. I was dying to snoop more, but it seemed an abuse of hospitality. One bedroom was as neat as the study, one locked, the others musty and dusty. The master bedroom, I was glad to see, was on the south-east corner where it belonged. A thoughtfully planned house.

The ceiling plaster was down in one place, and I made a note to check the roof over it, first priority.

In the hallway of the bedroom wing I heard—or thought I heard—a moaning sound that in the dim dustiness prickled the back of my neck, but Mona didn't show any response. I told myself then—but not later—that it had been a branch rubbing against the eaves.

As she led me back through the living area, I noticed a dusty portrait over the big stone fireplace. It was of a

woman, maybe fortyish, who had a striking resemblance to Mona. A neatly dusted photo on the mantelpiece under it looked even more like her—same age, same family features. I had no doubt now that she really was family, one how or another. I didn't comment, but she felt me looking at her, glanced up at the portraits, and smiled back at me.

I didn't want to let go of this experience, but it was time. At the door I realized we were leaning toward each other, her left hand clinging to my right as mine to hers.

I bent over and reached around her waist; she turned her cheek to me and let me kiss it. I smelled the sweet burnt smell of hair, an innocent soapy shampoo, a faint flowery fragrance; the smell of a fresh-washed young woman and clothes washed in Oxydol. Her breasts were soft against me.

Her cheek was cool. So was I. I hadn't noticed till just then that in that shaded house, here in early April, it couldn't have been more than sixty degrees or so.

We stayed that way for a couple of moments. Then she squeezed my hand and let it go, drew her face away, and smiled up at me.

"Mona. Please call Brett Simonds. Or a lawyer of your

own. Or call me, and I'll help you work out a plan."

"Don't worry."

"I'll be back in a couple of days. Do some trimming and cleanup. If you won't feel like I'm intruding."

She twitched her head no. "Not at all. I'm not here very often, but come by anytime." She patted my arm and smiled the faintest of Mona Lisa smiles. "Goodbye, Henry."

"Goodbye, Mona."

She closed the door behind me and retreated back into the house. She smiled over her shoulder at me as I was picking up my tools from the step, and I smiled back at her, and she was gone into one of the many hallways of the house.

I drove back to town very slowly, not wanting to come down from the experience I'd just had, strange as it was. I stopped at the plant and vegetable place, saw some plants I could use soon, paid for the pleasant eldery woman's trouble meanwhile by buying some early greens. I didn't want them, but I had tenants who could use fresh collards and young mustard.

The rest of the morning I basically sat and thought. I went out for a late lunch rather than face another bachelor concoction, then went to the



Greenville *Sentinel*. A nice young girl just out of journalism school helped me find the files for early 1961. They were on microfilm now. I started with April first, and on the twelfth found what I was looking for.

It was front-page news: fine old local family wiped out in a smashup, here just before Easter.

Identified dead were Oswald Corbin, fifty; Nancy Lee Daughtry Corbin, forty-two; Richard W. Corbin II, sixteen; and Anne D. Corbin, twelve. In the other car were a couple named Henderson from Atlanta. A seventh body, burned beyond recognition, was found in the charred wreckage. The Corbins were survived by his brother, Richard Corbin, of California, and her widowed mother, Anne Lee Daughtry.

The miasmal sadness of it hit me then. Till now, it had been a road statistic, a real estate fact. Now it was a grieving grandmother and a brother who never knew, and a sad empty house.

I checked the grandmother out later. She had died a few weeks after the accident, leaving no other heirs.

That still didn't answer my main question. After a day and a half I finally located tax office

records in the basement of the courthouse that listed a Mona Louise Corbin, daughter of Oswald, as a resident of the house.

Don't ask me what was going on in my head. I don't know. I looked for other records of Mona Corbin, found a birth record, no death record, no marriage record. Which didn't prove she hadn't married or died elsewhere. That Mona would be fiftyish now, and Mona was hardly more than out of college, if that. I didn't see it spelled out anywhere, but I assumed the seventh body must have been popularly believed to be hers.

The next couple of days I picked old local brains, and added a crumb or two of official-record data to my scanty store.

Green County hadn't had what you could call a sophisticated system of forensic pathology in those days, nor for that matter had the state generally.

From a retired funeral home director I learned more about the condition of the extra body than I wanted to know. Both smashed and charred, it had been beyond even dental identification; that is, the family dentist and the state medical examiner's office together had agreed that the lack of positive confirmation wasn't definitive. Especially since the dentist's records had been very haphaz-

ard. A bone study gave the age as around twenty, and there were enough internal organs left to identify the corpse as female.

One school of thought held the common sense position that, since there was one corpse too many and one Mona too few, it had to be her. The state medical examiner, however, presuming her innocent till proven guilty, declined to declare her dead. Local rumor had it that Mona had been thrown from the wreckage and was wandering around with amnesia, or that she had eloped a few days earlier and that the body was a hitchhiker who had been in the Henderson car.

A group of citizens had finally pulled strings and had the body released, months later, for burial in the family plot, but the courage of their convictions seemed to falter at the end. I went to the graveyard and saw the matching pink granite headstones all in a row: Oswald, Nancy, Richard, Anne, and a fifth one that read only, "Died April 11, 1961." I sat on a nearby marble slab and had a quiet cry, glad no one could see me.

By the end of the week I was weary, as from one of those seminightmares where you work hard all night and wake tireder than when you went to

bed. Friday I had supper in town, drove home, and put my feet up. I was just starting my second beer and beginning to relax when the phone rang.

When I picked it up, I heard the hissing staticky sound of a bad connection, like an old fashioned patched-through long distance call.

"Hello?"

"Henry?" I could barely hear the voice.

"Yes. I think we have a bad connection. Can you hear me?"

"Well enough. Henry, this is Mona. I wanted to tell you I won't be around for a few days, but please go ahead with your work. I thought I might see you before, but you haven't been out."

"No, I had some urgent things to do." I didn't tell her I had mostly been trying to find out whether or not she'd been dead for thirty years.

"Henry, I have to go now—" there was so much static I lost her. Including a tone that reminded me of the moaning sound I'd heard or imagined in the hallway.

"Mona?"

Her voice came back, at the very edge of hearing. "Henry, go ahead and buy it. I promise you . . ." The voice faded entirely into the gray haze of the static. I held on for a minute, waiting for it to come back. Fi-

nally the line went dead, and then after a bit I juggled the receiver and got a busy signal. I hung up.

A tantalizing memory nibbled at the back of my mind—what did this remind me of? It finally came to me: a distant voice in a dream, a voice from the dead, that has something important to say to you, and you can *almost*, but not quite ever, hear the message.

Every hair on my body stood up.

I was halfway up the gravel road before I changed my mind. Partly because I couldn't be comfortable about going into that haunted house at night. Partly because it didn't seem, somehow, time for it. Mostly—and this surprised me—because I would feel I was intruding on Mona. Whatever she was. I turned around just before the plant place and went home.

**N**ext day, though, I put everything else on hold and drove out as soon as the sun was up enough to take the chill off.

The front door was locked. I remembered she hadn't locked it behind me. If she existed, if the whole thing hadn't been a vivid dream episode, an hallucination.

I *felt* sane, but there was something mad in the picture.

I flipped open the mailbox, and there, lying on the bottom, was the key. So I'd taken the substance of it for the ghost. I reached in and took it out and there, where it had been, was the ghost image of it I'd seen originally. The back of my neck prickled again.

The key fitted nicely. The lock was stiff but not frozen. I let myself in, looking around at every step. The portrait was there—at least I hadn't hallucinated that. And that face was Mona still, twenty years older. And the younger woman . . .

The dust on the floor had been brushed by drafts just enough to obscure the identity of the footprints without obliterating them. So I *had* walked that tour—but with or without company?

I retraced the path to the den. It was still there, still nearly dust free. I recognized a couple of the books on the shelf. No tea stuff, no business card, no twenty dollar bill.

The physical evidence seemed to be that the experience was real, except for my imaginary playmate. That I had been in these rooms, but not with her. No girl, no cup of tea.

I am reasonably confident of my own sanity, and also aware that anyone can suffer a momentary aberration. I couldn't get the exact sequence pinned down, but it seemed fairly reasonable to suppose that I had seen the portrait, reconstructed my heart's desire from it by some unconscious process, and flipped into a waking dream in order to fill my repressed needs.

Slowly I walked around, looking for cues and causes. Some of it I couldn't explain away, like the name Mona. There had to be ESP or something operating, too.

In the kitchen I saw the tea tray. The string of the teabag was wrapped around the spoon, just as I remembered doing it. There was a faint growth of mould on the teabag, and it was just slightly damp to the touch.

I had to sit down. I did, right on the kitchen floor, and put my head between my knees for a minute.

I didn't pass out, but my heart was still pounding in my ears when I stood up and walked to Mona's room. So I called it in my mind.

Like the den, it was clean. I opened a drawer of the dresser, and there were clean blouses and lingerie in it. The smell of old fashioned pre-detergent Oxydol and a faint fragrance of sachet floated up to my nose.

Good smell, clean smell, *live-girl* smell.

I opened another drawer, and there was slightly yellowed clean stationery and old correspondence in it. Including some letters addressed to Miss Mona Corbin, mailed with reddish-violet four-cent stamps.

I wanted to read the letters, turn back the covers of the bed, touch and smell the linens. I couldn't—I already had the feeling of unforgiveable intrusion. I walked out of the room and left the door ajar as I'd found it.

As I passed back through the dining area, I noticed a sheet of paper on the table, held down by a beautiful little Venetian paperweight. Impatient as I was to see the paper, I had to stop a moment to admire the fine *millefiore* blossoms trapped forever in glass. My fingers trembled when I lifted the paper from under it.

It was the same notepaper as in the drawer, a fine cream laid, with the monogram *mCl* gold-embossed. It read:

*Dear Henry,*

*I'm very sorry that I must be away for a while, perhaps two or three weeks. I had wanted to see you before I left, but I will let you know when I re-*

*turn. Take good care of the house.*

*Mona*

*P.S.: Thank you* (words scratched out)

It was written in blueblack ink with a real fountain pen; I could see the parallel lines where the nib had played on the downstroke. Despite the formality of it, I felt warmed by it. Until I remembered that I'd decided she was an hallucination. This put me, once more, at sea without an oar. The rules wouldn't stand still for me to learn the game.

I worked fitfully around the house and yard for a while, stopping occasionally to check things out as I thought of them. Like water, electricity, and gas: all off. The water was probably from a well and the gas bottled, but at any rate that raised questions about how the tea was made. I saw no water jug, no Sterno stove. I did find matching teabags in a tight canister.

The phone was on a table in the hallway. Black, rotary dial, straight cord covered in brown fabric. Its dial was dusty, but I picked it up anyhow. Dead as a doornail. Dead as its former owners.

By lunchtime I had my plan roughed out. I put my tools back in the truck, stopped to

eat on the way to town. I went to the power company, the phone company, the pump and well man, and the propane people. I bought a cashier's check for ten thousand dollars, took it to Brett Simonds, and told him to draw up a contract and take it to the vestry.

I drove around and got three laid-off tenants to work off back rent, half cash, half tradeout. They were glad to get the opportunity. Things were slow in Greenvale that spring.

The project took less than two weeks to reach a point I could live with. Or live *at*. Mona's room stayed untouched, the master bedroom was totally renovated and my stuff moved in. The vestry eagerly accepted my ten grand; glad to get off the hook and be paid for it. The grounds became sunny, and more than a cord of green firewood was stacked by the garage. All the old stuff of any apparent value—and much that wasn't—got stored in various unused rooms. A lot of once-quality stuff had to be tossed for deterioration. We took three pickup loads to the landfill, which turned out to be more than the two miles away.

I saw through myself with painful embarrassment, but no one else seemed to. It was a quixotic gesture, whatever practical mask I put over it.

Simply put, Mona—phantom, demon lover, succubus, whatever she was—was the focus of all my efforts. I was constructing a bower for her, like a male bowerbird.

During this period there was a discovery that half elucidated and half obscured. Another room, the formerly locked bedroom, had been inhabited. It was clean, stripped almost bare, no clue as to the identity of its inhabitant.

This, then, explained the “we.”

Partly.

My first night in the old Corbin house was uneasy. I’d never learnt its night sounds, and each creak or rustle alarmed me. I half expected Mona to show up at midnight, semi-transparent. I half expected her to be laughing over drinks somewhere, telling her companion about the extended pointless scam she’d pulled on a gullible real estate collector. I three-quarters expected both of those guesses to be wildly wrong.

A few days after that I came home at dusk to find a note on the dining table, this time under a vase of real flowers from the garden. A lot of spring bulbs and flowering shrubs had survived and prospered. Excited, hopeful, and fearful, I read it:

*Dear Henry,*

*I’m sorry I missed you. I had a few minutes today, and came by.*

*In the next few days I will come by in the evening, and be able to stay longer.*

*The house is looking beautiful. Thank you for keeping “my room” as it was. I may invite myself to make use of it sometime when my life is in better condition.*

*Mona*

I clung to the letter, felt the paper, smelt the ink. I had begun again to doubt Mona’s physical existence. This reassured me. For a while.

I waited the few days, more than a week actually. She didn’t come.

During that week I obsessed, tried to reason in a vacuum with insufficient data. I drank too much of an evening—whether beer, wine, or coffee—just sitting and thinking, looking at hypothesis after hypothesis, trying to figure out what was going on.

I took the known facts and subjective reactions apart and put them together in different patterns, trying to come up with something that made sense.

The house itself was part of it. While I’m not any more a

“sensitive” than most people—I think we all are to a degree—I felt *presences* there. Not a specific ghost, unless Mona herself, but just a lot of psychic life that had no physical dwelling except the house I shared with them. They were more like the Chinese *fang-hsui*, “place spirits.”

My spirits were basically nonhostile, even friendly. There were night noises and occasional physical objects transplanted, with no visible cause. Once and only once, wide awake and sober, I did see a moving form that wasn't there, in the early dusk, but certainly not as complete an apparition as Mona.

One of the things I had to check out was my own sanity. I minored in psych, and did a little cautious drug experimenting in college. I didn't think I was showing any evidence of psychosis in the rest of my affairs, and it seemed unlikely that years later I was having flashbacks from a couple of mild LSD trips.

But I couldn't totally rule out a little pocket psychosis, an encapsulated delusion. For one thing, my lovelife was such a desert and had been for years—and travelers lost in the desert not only see mirages, they try to drink from them.

The very nature of Mona made this hypothesis more credible: her sweetness of face and softness of body, the very fragrance of her, were almost too much what I had longed for over the years and never found. Very much a wish-fulfillment image.

And she seemed somehow familiar, known. Like a face from the past, or my anima . . . or my fantasy.

So I couldn't totally discount the possibility that some dissociated component of my otherwise reasonably intact personality was living out a waking dream, even fabricating evidence to support it. Similar and queerer things have been identified in clinical practice. The evidence, inner and outer, was ninety-nine percent against it. But only ninety-nine percent.

Exonerating the house and myself, accepting Mona as the real physical organism she seemed to be, what was she?

I almost preferred the prankster hypothesis. My ego would sooner or later rebound from the rumpled pride of being scammed. I might even get to know her later on a different basis, even appreciate her absurd sense of humor. The problem was that I couldn't see adequate motivation or an adequacy of means and opportunity. She certainly had had



no way of predicting my earlier arrivals. Unless she had a pipeline into my unconscious, and that brought us, by circular reasoning, back to the delusion hypothesis.

The remaining theory, and the one I liked least, was that she herself was a lunatic. I resisted this, preferred to believe in my own psychosis—which I could somehow handle—rather than hers, which I couldn't.

I was in effect her prisoner, waiting day to day for her revelation.

Then, at last, she came to me one night. Small hours, the half moon bright and near setting. It was partly ESP, I think, which was very much a part of it from the beginning. First I woke, then I heard her. The quiet steps into Her room, little unidentifiable sounds, then barefoot steps back out and down the hall, by moonlight and the dim little nightlight, toward me.

I was fully awake by then, my scalp prickling in readiness for the girl who might be a ghost.

Her figure dimly silhouetted in the doorway was instantly recognizable. Though in total darkness I would have known it was Mona.

A rustle of clothing, a little lurch of the bed, and she was

beside me, the slippery polyester of her slip against my bare skin, her breasts and hair soft against me.

I was ready in a moment, but this wasn't what she had come for. She rubbed her wet face against my chest, and softly sobbed, and sobbed, and sobbed.

I put my arm under her head, kissed her sweet clean hair and forehead, stroked her back in long slow strokes with my free hand, and patted her bottom with the other, gentle little pats as for burping a baby. Inside my head, a verse of folk song sang itself over and over: "One night she knelt down by my side/While I was fast asleep/She put her arms around my neck/And then began to weep."

At last she stopped weeping. "Mona—"

"Shh. Hush. Don't talk. Love me, just love me."

"I love you. Tell me you're not a ghost."

"Nn-uh. I'm not a ghost. I wish I were. I wish I were dead. God, it's too much."

"I love you, Mona. Don't be dead."

"Nn-uh. Hush. I love you for being good. Don't talk."

"Nn-uh." I reached under her slip and rubbed the bare skin of her back and stroked my face with her hair. I meant to stay

awake and savor her presence, the warmth of her body—she was no longer cool like a ghost, but warm like a woman—and the sweet clean woman-smell of her, and the *aura* of her. But we both fell asleep.

In the dark I woke from a dream to find it was only partly dream. Her hand was on me, and her body was bare.

"Henry. I know you need it. It's okay. Just don't expect much. Please?"

"Okay."

I took her, as slowly and gently as my frenzied hunger for her allowed: I never knew how intense my wanting had grown over the weeks of courting a ghost.

In a way it wasn't much, just as she'd said. In another way it seemed very much indeed. I thought she'd never had a lover before. It didn't matter, one way or the other, and I never asked her. It was unskilled, and it was a giving, and I was old enough to accept it at that, and appreciate it more than most men might have.

The east was showing the slightest tinge of grey when she stroked and kissed me awake again.

"Henry. I have to go soon. Are you awake?"

"Mm-hm."

"I owe you something. I'll pay it, I'll give you what I owe. Okay?"

"Mm-hm."

"Henry, listen. Don't try to follow me. Okay?"

"Mmm."

"Promise me."

"Why not? I love you."

"Shut up. You can't, you mustn't. I have to go now, Henry, and I'll give you something soon. To forgive me and remember me by."

"Mona—"

"Hush." The rustle-swish of clothes going back on, the rustle-pat of her fingers on the carpet, looking for a lost garment.

"Mona, don't leave me. I've waited for you. I restored a house for you."

"Shut up. If you make me cry, I'll slap you."

She walked out. The night was so quiet that I thought I could hear her shoes going back on in Her room.

In a minute she came back, knelt by my bed. She put one hand on my head and the other on my shoulder.

"Henry. Don't answer. My love hurts. It kills. So I'll love you just a moment, then you'll suffer just a little while, then you're free."

"Mona—"

"Shhh." She put her lips on mine, at first soft and tender, then in growing intensity till I

felt in her kiss desperation, rage, fear verging on panic, sorrow. And also, I thought, love and primitive hunger. Then she was gone.

I obeyed her. I would have followed if I'd thought it would work. I didn't try.

A couple of minutes later I heard a car, an old Detroit V-8 clunker. She must have been getting here by coming up the Quarry Road and cutting through the dirt road in the woods.

I still didn't know what I believed. Mona was no longer a ghost, but now I couldn't decide whether she was gone forever. The front of my head believed her literally, but some part of me that wasn't merely hope saw a chance.

For a while I lay there trying to think with my tired brain, and somewhere along the line I fell back asleep.

Morning was unambivalent, even if I wasn't. The sun was liquid gold poured over the burgeoning foliage and fresh-sprouting grass, giving almost fluorescent color to the flock of robins sweetly twittering on the lawn. My first conscious thought when I looked out the window was that Mona ought to be here to share the sight with me.

A pang hit me right under the breastbone then. The old doubt that she was real came back for a moment, demanding that I prove it wasn't merely a wet dream. I bent over the rumpled pillows, found a couple of long wavy brown hairs. I put them in a little box on the dresser as if they were sacred relics. My bare toe, while I was doing this, found a clean, worn, and shabby bra under the edge of the bed.

The rest of the week I functioned semiconsciously, half my mind on my work and the rest way off somewhere, doing a search for my magical maiden. The central glowing fact of my being was that we had touched. I had felt her skin on mine, been warmed by it, and some very tenacious part of me wasn't ready to let this slip away into the past.

Then one morning I opened my post office box and found a yellow slip in it. Pick up a certified letter. I examined the zip code on the notice. It was from just a county or two away.

My fingers trembled as I signed for it. I had no doubt, though I wasn't sure what it was that I didn't doubt. It was a business-like envelope, thickish. I made myself wait until I was in the car before I opened it.

Inside was a quitclaim deed for the Old Corbin House—"For Twenty Dollars and other valuable considerations"—signed "Mona L. Corbin/P.O.A." This raised more ghostly questions than it laid: if Mona had power of attorney, for whom? And still, the riddle of who Mona was remained unanswered.

Things began coming together in my mind, like segments of a jigsaw puzzle you haven't yet fitted into the whole picture.

It took a few minutes of deep breathing before I felt roadworthy. When my vision came back to normal and my pulse slowed down, I hit the road for Emmons ville.

The address on the envelope didn't exist. I checked with the Chamber of Commerce and the county zoning board just to be sure. I finally figured she'd had to give an address to get it certified at the post office, so she just invented one. I was angry and frustrated, and I was a little amused.

Leaving Emmons ville, I saw the sign pointing to the state hospital and another piece fell into place. I drove another mile or so, made a decision, U-turned and went back to the hospital.

I spent hours waiting in offices. I verified that she was there, but no one would tell me

any more till I'd worked my way up to the overworked staff psychiatrist in charge of her case.

My cover story was half lies, half truths. "I'm a friend of the family, from long back," I explained. "I'd like to be as supportive as possible, but I really don't know what to do."

He sighed wearily. "Her psychiatric social worker can tell you of any practical help you can give." He smiled a faint smile. "If you're *that* kind of friend, I know money is a problem. She's basically a charity case." He scribbled the social worker's name and office number on the back of a prescription blank.

"Before I go, doctor—so I can be prepared—what, frankly, is the prognosis?"

He shook his head and frowned. "Frankly, terminal. Admitting symptoms, when she came in a month or so ago, were paranoid delusions. We found a tumor, inoperable, possibly the result of an old head trauma. The worse the tumor gets, the worse the psychosis. She's, basically, in the back of the violent ward now, waiting for the end. I think, even if she had been admitted much earlier, the story would have been the same. I'm sorry."

I made a wordless sound deep in the back of my throat.

"Thank you very much, doctor."

I went to see the social worker, discussed needs, wrote a check for past due maintenance. With subtle cunning, I tricked her just as I was leaving. "I'd like to see the daughter before I go back to Greenvale, but I don't have her address."

She looked dubious. "I can't release that information," she said, turning the data sheet so I could read it. Five twenty-eight North Third Street.

It was a falling-down house in a falling-apart neighborhood. I knocked on the door and nothing happened. It echoed the way a house with nobody home echoes. I moved my car around the corner where I could see the house without being conspicuous.

A little after five a battered old Ford pulled up in front, and she got out, looking infinitely weary, shabby purse dangling from her limp arm. I was up to the front porch before she finished opening the door. She heard my feet on the shaky steps and turned around, fear on her face.

Her knees sagged and I was afraid she would faint before I got to her, but she tottered into my arms and buried her head in my chest. She was limp, and I hugged her to me and leaned

back to help support her weight.

After a while the silent heaving stopped, and she looked up at me, red-eyed. "Mmmpf," she said. She wanted to talk and didn't have the words.

"Time to feed you, I think."

"Mmm. Let me do something to my face."

"Me first." I turned her face up to mine, kissed the salty wet eyelids and cheeks. She leaned against me for a moment, more tranquil this time.

"Henry. You shouldn't have followed me."

"I didn't follow you. I tracked you down. You didn't make it easy."

"Henry—"

"Hush. Your turn to hush. You need a good feeding. You look anemic. How long since you've had a really good meal?"

She half smiled. "Long time, a really good one."

"Good red meat. You like prime rib?"

"Henry, I *can't* go to a really good place looking like this. And I don't have anything *b-better*." Her nose pinched and her eyes squinted and she sniffed tears back.

"Ponderosa, then? Nobody looks at you there."

Sniff. "Okay. Let me wash my face."

I sat on the shabby rump-sprung sofa while she fresh-

ened up. She came back in a few minutes looking better and happier. Her fresh blouse was a floral print that seemed to reflect a little color into her face.

We spoke very little on the way. She put her hand between the seats where I could reach it, and I held it as we drove. Once in a while she would squeeze mine, a tight, almost spastic little squeeze.

What I'd had in mind was candlelight and linen napkins, but we went through the assembly line, Mona so weary that she wobbled on her feet; I made her order the biggest piece of beef they had. I asked for a quiet corner table, and we got it. Mona stood, ladylike, till I seated her.

With any other girl on what was a sort of first-date situation I'd have been uneasy at her silence, but I had some idea what she was going through. I made her take a second glass of burgundy. It was awful California stuff, but it relaxed us both.

When the food came, we stayed so busy eating we both barely spoke. Halfway through the meal she carefully put her knife and fork on the edge of the plate and looked at me, a look on her face that I couldn't read.

She smiled a faint, crooked little smile and hesitantly said, "I filled up on potato and now I

can't finish the steak. Would you be terribly embarrassed if I asked for a doggie bag?"

For some reason, that relaxed me tremendously. The mild tension I'd felt all through the meal slacked off. Maybe this was the final evidence I'd needed that she wasn't a ghost.

"Not at all. I've been through some lean times, and I was brought up not to waste food. If you'd abandoned it, I probably would have eaten it myself."

She relaxed too, then. "Thank you." She was silent for a minute, then said: "I'm illegitimate, but my mother brought me up to be a lady."

"You look very legitimate to me, now that you're not a ghost." We both grinned. "But you're not living like a lady. I mean, you're—"

She smiled a sourish but not totally uncharming smile. "I don't need reminding of that."

"Well, look, Mona." I chugged the last of my wine and topped us both up from the little carafe. "What I'm trying to say is, well, I'm not rich, but . . . what you could do, you could move into your room and trust me to be a gentlemen. Assuming you wanted me to be. However frustrating I might find it. I could help you find a job in Greenvale, I could pay you to catch up on my paperwork meanwhile. I could

hire you as housekeeper, food and shelter and a modest stipend."

Mona tried to get a word in edgewise while I took another mouthful of wine, but I ploughed her under. "You could sell your old clunker for what it would bring, the Mercedes could be your car, I have the pickup. You'd be mobile, you could come over visiting days. I could help with—"

"Henry." She touched her fingers to my arm, light as an angel's wingtip feathers.

"I could help with . . . medical expenses," I went on with viniferous stubbornness. "And if the . . . situation didn't seem well, *respectable* enough, well, dammit, I could marry you." I hiccupped, and she was lady enough to keep her face straight. I hadn't meant my proposal to be anything but decorous and romantic, after due process and in the perfect setting, not casually tossed out in a clattering cafeteria. But desperation was driving me.

"Henry," she repeated, gently persistent. "Henry, don't be hurt. I have to say this." I frowned and prepared myself to hear something that would feel bitter to my ears. "Listen, I think you're a fine person, generous and decent and all. I think of you as a friend, the

nearest thing to a real friend I have, and I *need* a friend."

"But."

"But—"

"But anything else is presumptuous."

"Hush. But I feel like you've got me surrounded, you're trying to capture me or buy me or something. I don't *resent* this, I'm not angry, I think you've got my best interests at heart. But it scares me to death. Henry, I've been a *captive* all my life. I was a dependent child, and then before I was ready for it, Mother became a dependent child, and I had to take care of her. Henry, I've never had time to be *me*. I can't make any intelligent, serious decisions till . . . Mother finishes dying. I mean, she's gone, she's not *there* any longer, in my mind, I've already buried her." Her voice broke, her tears very near the surface. I had sense enough to stay quiet.

She took a modest sip of wine and went on: "Henry, you can't just fix me *up*. Build a fence around me and restore me. You know a lot about houses, but I don't think—" she giggled a nervous little giggle—"I don't think you know as much about women as I do about *men*, even."

Ponderously I shifted my mindset. I had the hunch that the longer the conversation



stayed on her-and-me, the worse it was for my cause right then. As casually as I could, I patted her hand on the table and said, "Tell me about all your other men."

Mona blushed and giggled again. "Well, that's just *it*. Men were always an alien *race* to me. Henry, I never even *dated*, just a couple of times, in high school and junior college. Mother and I were always, well, we were all each other had."

She took another sip and went on. "I was going to the senior prom with this nice boy. We sewed me up, Mother and I did, a fancy gown. Then Mother had one of her spells, and I had to cancel it. I never could look him in the face, the last couple of weeks before graduation."

She had more to say, but we tacitly agreed to let the conversation dwindle down to occasional trivialities.

When we arrived at her shabby rented house, she was still tipsy enough to take my hand going up the wobbly front steps. She handed me the key, and I unlocked for her.

"Turn the light on. I'm always a little scared to come home here after dark."

I flipped the switch, looked in, and held the screen door for her. She expected me to follow,

and I did. She put her purse down and said, "I don't have any liquor or anything, and I'm out of coffee."

"I'm fine, thanks."

She slipped her shoes off, sat on the sofa, and put her feet on the coffee table. I sat beside her, wanting to touch and not daring.

"I'm awfully sorry about the tea I served you when we met. I didn't know *what* to do." She giggled, still charmingly tipsy or maybe just relaxed for the first time in weeks or years. "It was a social occasion I hadn't been trained for."

"That's one thing I haven't figured out. Where did you get the water, and how did you heat it?"

She gave me a look that was more Mona Lisa than Mona Corbin, and half smirking schoolgirl. "I had a thermos of hot water with me."

"Oh."

We weren't urgent to talk. I was comfortable, in a wistful sort of way, just being in her presence. After a couple of minutes she said, "I should apologize for all the intrusions. We really *were* squatting, sort of. She kept running away, as she was getting worse. I finally followed her to the house. She'd come, and I'd stay with her till she got better, then bring her back here. Then finally, a few

weeks ago, she got too—I finally just had to have her committed.” She sniffled.

“There’s still a lot I don’t know. But you weren’t squatting. It was her house, and you are her . . . guardian.”

She shook her head. “She never, till the end there, thought it belonged to us . . . I always thought it wasn’t mine, I had no right to it, but I wished we could come back to it. It represented something to me. Stability, respectability, prosperity. Peace and quiet. A place where I could belong meaningfully, I’d never had that. We always somehow were on the move. It represented a . . . *haven*.”

“Returning to a Golden Age you’d never known.” She smiled a wistful smile at me. We all have some kind of Golden Age image in us. “Mona, it’s your birthright. I still have my apartment in town. I can move out in a few days.”

She shook her head. “She was sure she didn’t have a right to it because she’d killed them all.”

“She *was* driving, then. I sort of thought that might be the case. What were her, the doctor said, ‘paranoid delusions’? They came from the accident, didn’t they? And maybe the tumor, too.”

Mona nodded. “I don’t know, never knew, whether she meant legally or, or . . . *morally* it wasn’t hers, because she’d killed them. But at the last, I mean recently, she just *went* there, like home. Even though it was dead and dirty. And anyhow, I’m a bastard.”

I squeezed her hand, a little too hard. “You’re not even a bitch, honey . . . your legitimacy, or lack of it, has exactly no bearing on it. You’re biologically Mona Louise Corbin’s daughter, and thus the sole . . . legally responsible survivor of Oswald Corbin’s family. I checked the law on that when I was buying it, just in case. Incidentally, that threw me off balance for a while. Same name and initial. That’s one reason it was easy for me to believe you were a ghost.”

She chuckled a humorless little chuckle. “It threw me off balance, too, for years. I finally figured out what went on in her head. She killed Mona off after the accident, sort of rejected the old identity. She became Louise. But she named me Mona Lee. I think I was supposed to be, sort of, herself renewed.”

After a long silence I said, “It all makes more sense now, I mean where everybody was coming from, how it all happened.” There was much more to say, and no way I felt safe in

saying it. Finally I murmured, "That still leaves us both with problems." I spread my hand on the shabby sofa, wanting to take hers, not daring lest I drive her away. "Mona . . ."

"Sssh." She put her hand in mine. "Henry, if you made yourself the big brother I never had and all that, don't you see that's all you could ever be? Now go home and give me some space."

"Okay." I stood up and she saw me to the door. "Maybe I'll join the Foreign Legion. If they still have it. Something like that." I smiled to prove I was joking, but it was a wry smile.

She returned my smile, an impishness to it I had never seen in her before. "Be sure to come back when your enlistment is over."

Our kiss was as sweet and gentle and undemanding as I could make it. I hugged a little too long and hard, but she endured it.

My last card to her was from Tampico. The next will be from Vera Cruz, or maybe Jalapa, a town of noble peppers. I think by the time the month is up Brett will have sold her on one of the two deed options without jeopardizing my chances. Risking it was a damned hard choice for me, but . . .

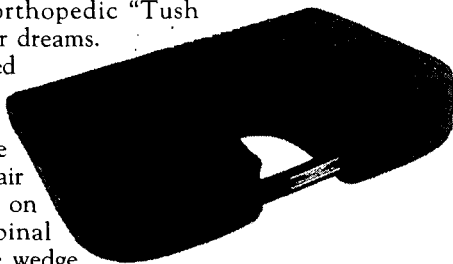
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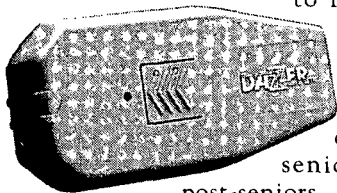
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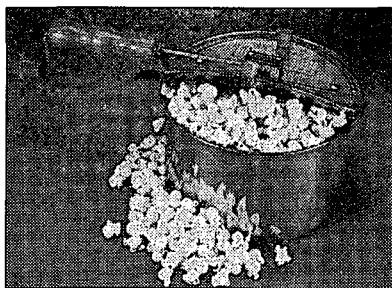
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FICTION

# My Late Aunt Hattie

by Tim Myers



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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I have never been more terrified in my life than the night Aunt Hattie walked into the living room. It doesn't sound like I had much reason for alarm, except for the fact that she had been dead for eight months. I never expected to see her again, and I was so surprised by her sudden appearance that I forgot to ask her about the five hundred silver dollars she had always promised me when she "passed over." Aunt Hattie didn't have much to say, her vocal cords having long ago rotted into the moist, damp soil that surrounded her body. We had been too poor at the time of her death to afford much more than the economy model of casket. Evidently it hadn't held up very well under the effects of the rain, the snow, and the gophers. In fact, the parts of Aunt Hattie that *were* there had two major problems; they smelled like ripe roadkill, and they had a difficult time staying attached. As soon as I saw the hall rug, I knew it was a total loss. There are some things that even Stanley Steamer can't get out of your carpet.

Aunt Hattie appeared on Halloween last year, about twenty minutes before midnight. She manifested suddenly in the entryway, the screen door still firmly latched. As she

shuffled toward me, I noticed that her cotton print burial shroud had not held up well, either. She had always been a fussy woman about her appearance, but I guess she just didn't notice how unkempt she had become. Her hair had turned into an unruly mess, filled with knots and tangles. The fingernails, painted a subdued red at the time of her interment, had grown ragged and coarse, the flecks of chipped polish flickering in the light of the fireplace. Her face was not for the weak-hearted. It had wrinkled and puckered into a tight mask, the main features atrophied away. Out of the general area of her mouth came a low, gurgling noise that had to be words. It was tough to understand, but it sounded like she was saying "A&P." Now, Aunt Hattie always had loved market day, but this was carrying things a little too far. It took a few minutes before I realized she didn't really want to go shopping at all. She was trying to say "Follow me." It must be like when children first learn to talk. No one can understand them but their parents. Aunt Hattie and I had always been close, but she was a little closer now than I cared to have her.

The air in the room was permeated with her wretched scent, so I decided to follow her



as she motioned me outside. Out in the yard, I was so nervous I wasn't watching where I was going and slipped in a little of Aunt Hattie. Darn, my brand new tennis shoes wouldn't be fit for mowing the lawn when this was over. I followed her from a distance, but the smell was still a gagging presence, hovering over everything around me. It reminded me of the time I had put out a mousetrap and had promptly forgotten about it. Until I noticed that my refrigerator had acquired a funny smell, that is. After checking all the interior contents, I decided it must have come from under the appliance. *Then* I remembered the long-forgotten mouse trap. The remains I found in that trap smelled like roses compared to Aunt Hattie's bouquet.

I followed her through the yard and straight to her favorite rosebushes. Those roses had been her pride and joy when she was alive, so I figured she was just taking a quick peek at them while she was in the neighborhood. Instead of moving on, she parked her decaying carcass right in front of those roses and kept saying, "Big. Big."

Now, I had watered and pruned those roses faithfully after Aunt Hattie died. I knew how much they meant to her. It

was my own secret memorial. I swelled with pride as she continued praising their growth since she had last seen them. But after a few minutes of her compliments, I grew tired of her moaning speech. My fidgeting must have attracted her attention. There wasn't much left in the way of eyeballs, but she somehow managed to convey the message that I was dumber than the horse manure she had always used to fertilize those bushes.

She finally gave up trying to speak and stumbled over to the barn, where we kept our tools. It looked to me like she was going to take a tour of the whole place, but I was in no position to protest. Just as she reached for the shovel, she started moaning, "Big, big," again, and pointing to those darned bushes. Dead or not, I was getting tired of her grunts and groans. As she reached out to whop me—a reaction I always seemed to evoke in her—the bells of Saint Thomas the Divine Catholic Church started ringing, declaring the beginning of All Saints' Day and banishing the spirits of the dead to another year of exile. As the last chime pealed, Aunt Hattie did the most unusual thing she had done since she had walked into my living room earlier that night, she

disappeared. Poof. No more Aunt Hattie and no more smell. I ran back to the house, more frightened by her vanishing act than her reappearance. I was stunned as I entered the hallway and looked at my rug. I couldn't believe it, but it was just as clean as it had been before her visit. Looking down, I saw that my tennis shoes were spotless, too—except for the dog poo that I had somehow picked up in the yard following her cadaver around.

About a year has passed since Aunt Hattie first visited me in the living room, and I am ready for her if she should decide to make a return visit this Halloween. The rosebushes are as pretty as ever, and I polished up the shovel in case she wants to see it again. I can't help thinking she was trying to tell me something last year, and if I can remember, I'm going to find out about those coins, too. Oh well. I'll ask her the next time I see her.

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### **SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED":**

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Libby was completely correct; Gordon and Alex were completely wrong. Number Two was the bank robber.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



# Bubnoff and the Devil

by Ivan Turgenev

Adapted by Marvin Kaye

**T**wilight was falling. The old woman who owned the three houses lining the half-mile country road closed up the shutters for the night; the chickens were already asleep in their sheds.

But Lieutenant (second class) Ivan Andreivich Bubnoff did not mind the solitude. He strolled briskly down the quiet roadway, his hands in his pockets, and imagined what it would be like if he were Napoleon.

His reverie was disturbed by the approach of a short man who appeared out of the gathering dusk. The stranger affected outlandish garments, and Bubnoff concluded that it must be Telyushkin, a wealthy local who was reputed to dress in the manner of the Turks. But Bubnoff had never set eyes on Telyushkin, and when the stranger spoke, the soldier immediately realized his assumption was incorrect.

"Good evening," the other said casually. "I would like to introduce myself. I am the Devil."

Uh-oh, thought Bubnoff. One of us is drunk. Either way, I'm getting out of here.

But the grinning stranger gestured and the lieutenant suddenly found he could not move.

"Neither of us is drunk, my good Ivan Andreivich Bubnoff. I actually am the Devil."

One of us is crazy, thought Ivan. Either way, I'd better get going—

But the other grasped the officer by his coat collar and spoke again. "Now tell me, Bubnoff," he said in a loud voice, "what do you think it would be like if you were Napoleon?"

When Bubnoff heard the tenor of his recent thoughts so accurately echoed, he was somewhat reassured. After all, he said to himself, perhaps this is the Devil.

"I will convince you that I am," the other replied. "Look at those thistles. What would you like me to do with them? Perhaps you would care to see them dance like Cossacks?"

With a bored gesture of his hand, the short man caused the thistles to perform a really first-rate Cossack dance. Bubnoff was impressed, but the Devil did not stop there. To further prove his identity, he swallowed his hooves and brought them out through his throat. He merrily juggled his eyeballs, then removed his nose and made a present of it to Ivan Andreivich, who put it in his jacket pocket.

"Now, Ivan Andreivich Bubnoff, *who am I?*"

"You are the Devil, right enough!" the other exclaimed. "But what do you want of me?"

"Nothing in particular. I was just a trifle bored, to tell the truth, and thought I might join you for a walk and perhaps a talk. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least!" said Bubnoff, and the two tramped along the road like two old comrades.

This is what I would call an absolutely unique experience, the lieutenant said to himself. Perhaps I am drunk after all. He grabbed the bristles of his mustache and yanked at them to see if he would wake. His neck began to creak.

"I shouldn't do that, if I were you," said the Devil. "You might pull too hard and yank your head from your shoulders—like this!" With that, he grabbed a handful of Bubnoff's hair and tugged his head straight off his neck. It would have surprised the soldier, if he'd had time to think about it, but a headless officer cannot command such a function by the very nature of the experience. The Devil played ball with Ivan Andreivich's head, then replaced it on the soldier's neck. As soon as he did, Bubnoff contrived to make an appropriate remark which he thought wittily suited to the occasion. The Devil winked and the two laughed like childhood friends.

After a time, they came to a forest, and the soldier began to grow uneasy. "Look here," he asked anxiously, "you aren't planning to lead me to some ravine where I will fall and die and be munched by buzzards, are you? I should not much care for that, you know!"

"My, what a notion!" exclaimed the Devil. "What do you take me for? I should never do such a thing to my good friend Ivan Andreivich!"

As he spoke, the Devil approached the bole of a gigantic oak tree, withered and twisted like some malignant creature of the night. He rested there, and Bubnoff heard an eerie croaking from somewhere above. Looking up, he saw the flutter of wings and an ancient raven settled into the branches of the oak.

Bubnoff was not a bird fancier, so what he thought was a raven was actually a crow. But, in truth, the crow was really one of the many changing shapes of the Devil's Grandma. (He did not have a mother, only a grandmother—why, nobody knew, not even the Devil.)

"I am now going to introduce you to my grandma," the Devil told the soldier, who began to protest.

"But I am not properly attired!"

"Never fear, she does not stand on such ceremony. But," the Devil cautioned, "I must ask you to please refrain from crossing yourself, or we will have to part company. Now will you kindly bite my tail off? Just the very end will do, you know."

As he made this peculiar request, the Devil flicked his tail so that the soft spade-tip hovered just a few inches in front of Bubnoff's lips.

"What a disgusting idea!" cried the soldier. "I shall do no such thing!"

"And why not?"

"Well," Bubnoff sputtered, floundering for a reason, "because it would hurt you, I suppose."

"Bah! What an idea! It would give me the greatest pleasure!" He pushed the appendage into Ivan Andreivich's mouth, but the officer yanked it out again.

"I say," he pleaded, "is it absolutely essential that I do this?"

The Devil nodded solemnly. Bubnoff, with a sigh, grasped the tail and raised it to his lips, then paused.

"I suppose," he said, "your tail will taste positively awful!"

"I beg your pardon!" the other said, his feelings a trifle ruffled. "My tail will taste exactly like whatever food you wish to taste. Go ahead, imagine any culinary delight whatever—that is what my tail's flavor will resemble."

"Very well," Ivan said, after a moment's thought, "I am partial to pickles and syrup." He bit the tail . . .

The Devil did not lie. His tail tasted like pickles and syrup (with just a trace of brimstone).

By the time Bubnoff had swallowed the tail-tip, the universe whirled about his ears and he found himself inside a small, reasonably neat room. An old harridan with a huge nose was sitting in a rocking chair cracking walnuts. The Devil waved his arm in her direction.

"Grandma, allow me to present Lieutenant (second class) Ivan Andreivich Bubnoff. Ivan Andreivich . . . my grandma."

The introductions completed, the Devil indicated a chair for the officer and left him alone with his grandma so he could go try on a new pair of horns.

Bubnoff sat there in awkward silence. Not only did he not know what to say to the old crone, but his knowledge of protocol did not extend to the proper form of address for so venerable a personage

as the grandmother of the Devil. At length, he began to utter a polite inanity, but the old woman immediately stopped him.

"There's no need for empty words," she cackled in a strange voice. As she did, each syllable seemed to fly through the air at him in a concentric spiral. Bubnoff's awkwardness disappeared, but the crone simply sat there, cracking walnuts, looking at him as if she expected him to speak. He shrugged and kept his peace, until at last, wearied by the silence, the Devil's Grandma jumped up from her rocker, grasped Bubnoff by the hands, and began to dance with great speed about the room.

"Come, love, come dance with me, little Bubnoff," she sang as they cavorted.

Ivan Andreivich's head began to spin and at length he called out to the Devil to come rescue him.

The Devil dashed in, his new horns upon his head. Catching his ancestor under the arms, he respectfully led her to her seat. Then he asked the lieutenant to forgive the old woman's whims.

"Now, Ivan Andreivich," he added, "because I wish to be a good host to you, I am going to let you meet my lovely little granddaughter. Her tail is barely sprouted, for she is quite young, but I trust in your honor and know you will not play upon her lack of experience. Bibbidibobbidibu! Please come in!"

The Devil's granddaughter entered from another room, curtsied before the soldier, and shyly clung to her great-great-grandmother.

Bubnoff bowed to her. "What did you say her name was?" he asked.

"Bibbidibobbidibu," the Devil replied.

"That doesn't sound like a Russian name," observed the soldier.

"We are from other parts," the Devil answered.

Bubnoff approached the Devil's granddaughter and bent over to kiss her hand, noting the slight curvature of the nails as he did. It made her fingers look like claws. As he pressed his lips to her dainty hand, he felt a tingling in them like sparks of lightning.

"Will you come with me to the garden for a walk?" she asked him in a low voice.

"Nothing could make me happier," Ivan Andreivich replied, although it was evident by the way the crone eyed the Devil that she was not much in favor of the proposed stroll. But the Devil did not object, so Bubnoff and Bibbidibobbidibu left the room in one another's company.



Though the Devil's garden looked like any other garden, Bubnoff noted uneasily that the vegetation therein was apparently in some kind of pain, since every flower, bush, and shrub emitted groans of anguish.

The Devil's granddaughter walked by the lieutenant's side for some time in silence. Then she looked up at Bubnoff, emitted a deep sigh, and told him that she was in love.

"With whom?" he asked politely.

"With you, Ivan Andreivich," she answered, her tongue flicking lightly over her lips.

"Pray contain yourself," he told her, remembering that his honor was at stake.

"But how may I? For I love you, and I want you to reciprocate my ardor," she said cajolingly. "I will make a garland of roses for you, redder than the blush of my cheeks. I will give you nuts to eat and the juice of many ferns to drink, and we will be glad and good, my Bubnoff, for I love you!"

He stared at her, and nearly spoke his love to her, but as he looked into her eyes, it seemed they shone like some predator cat; her nostrils flared and the tongue flicked over her lips, which parted to reveal the whitest and sharpest of teeth . . .

"I am sorry," he said firmly, "but I cannot say I love you, my child. Let us go back to your home."

"But where is it?" she mocked.

Bubnoff took a step, faltered, and flailed his arms about to keep balance. He was on the pinnacle of a high column, standing on one leg only; the other kicked in the empty air. The column was slippery with some kind of sticky fluid, and thousands of tiny demons clambered with great difficulty towards the top, falling back, climbing again, chattering and laughing as they tried to attain the grand prize of the slippery race—Bubnoff himself.

High in the air above his head floated Bibbidibobbidibu, tittering evilly at his plight.

"Help!" called the lieutenant. "Devil, this is unkind of you!" He found it hard to call out for fear of disturbing his precarious balance.

"Bubnoff! Child! Where have you gone?" the Devil's voice suddenly called.

As soon as the voice rang out, the soldier found himself back in the garden, with Bibbidibobbidibu by his side.

"For shame, my little one!" the Devil chided the girl. "Ivan Andreivich is an honored guest. You have treated him ill. Come, my friend, let us leave this silly urchin!"

"Silly urchin!" she snapped. "Indeed! Why, I am not so young as all that. Already my horns are beginning to sprout." She lowered her head, parted her hair, and showed two tiny, delicate horns to Bubnoff.

The officer, who had always been the most earthbound of mortals, suddenly leapt in the air, pirouetted twice, and bent down to kiss the tips of Bibbidibobbidibu's horns. As he did, the horn swelled and punched him smartly on the chin.

Later that evening, the family sat around the table with their guest. Bubnoff sat to the right of the old crone, who occupied the head of the table. The Devil faced him, and Bibbidibobbidibu's chair was at the foot of the table.

I wonder, thought Bubnoff, what we are going to have for dinner.

Just then, a huge covered platter entered the room, bowed, and hopped up on the table by itself.

Turning to her grandson, the old woman said, "I do believe we had better marry Lieutenant (second class) Bubnoff to our little Bibbidibobbidibu."

"Positively," nodded the Devil.

What a notion, thought the soldier. I cannot marry the Devil's granddaughter. Just think if there were children! What rank in society would they occupy? If I had a son by her, could he become a soldier? This is dreadful! I should never have nibbled on the Devil's tail!

"Now understand," said the Devil, "while I wish this marriage to take place, I would not for a moment consider it without the consent of both principals. I have too much love for my granddaughter to coerce her to wed one she does not fancy. Likewise, I have the highest esteem for my companion Ivan Andreivich. We shall put the matter to the question directly. My child—tell me truly—do you love my friend Bubnoff here?"

"Oh, she certainly does," cackled the Devil's Grandma. "Look at the way she is licking her lips!"

It was true. Bibbidibobbidibu once more let her crimson tongue tip flick hungrily over the sharp teeth in her dainty little mouth . . .

"She will eat me alive!" Bubnoff suddenly shouted in fear.

"*Bon appetit!*" the Devil murmured.

"What?" Ivan Andreivich shouted again. "I am an officer and an honored guest! One does not eat a guest!"

"But of course we do!" the Devil argued. "It is absolutely necessary for us to do it—and extremely enjoyable, besides!"

"You shall *not* enjoy me at my expense!" the soldier angrily proclaimed, making flamboyant gestures with his arms. "I am getting out of here. I was a damned fool to eat the tip of your tail!"

He tried to get up, but he could not budge. His chair had turned into a gigantic tarantula that grasped him with diabolic strength.

The Devil, the old woman, and Bibbidibobbidibu all laughed at Bubnoff's plight. The crone's cackle was like the bleat of a goat, and the girl gurgled with sensual delight as the soldier squirmed helplessly.

"Let me out!" Bubnoff protested. "Avaunt, fiends, in the Holy name—"

"Stop him! He will cross himself!" the Devil roared.

Bibbidibobbidibu jumped up and, smiling in her predatory manner, bit off Bubnoff's arm at the shoulder. The giant tureen opened and the screaming soldier was dumped inside and spiced with pepper and brimstone, oil and vinegar, and the scarlet juice of cranberries. Weird music sounded in the air around the grisly supper scene as the three fiends ate the lieutenant and picked his bones clean. Bibbidibobbidibu was awarded the prize of the soldier's heart, which she devoured with gusto, while the Devil almost gagged on a trouser button.

In the morning, Lieutenant (second class) Ivan Andreivich Bubnoff woke face down in the middle of the lonely country road. He bounded up, terrified, sure that he was not there, but really in pieces in the viscera of the three demons. It took the better part of the day for him to calm down and realize he was still alive.

Bubnoff, though he lived to a ripe old age and eventually became a lieutenant first class, never forgot his evening with the Devil. Many times he would assure his fellow officers that if he were Napoleon, he would round up every single demon and murder them all on the spot!

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**I**t's Halloween time again, time to bag yourself a few good crime fiction novels. Here are a few titles that should prove tricky enough to satisfy your mystery-loving tastes.

Fans of male P.I. novels will welcome two recent publications. Alan Russell's **No Sign of Murder** (Avon, \$4.99) introduces Stuart Winter, a wisecracking but tenderhearted gumshoe in search of a beautiful deaf student who is missing. The case takes him down a dark trail of dangerously offbeat artists, behind the respectable facade of the woman's wealthy home life, and into the fascinating world of gorilla research (Anna was teaching a gorilla to sign, her primary language). Russell has set his detective up with a colorful cast of supporting characters and tops off the novel with a heart-rending twist, all of which make *No Sign of Murder* a promising debut.

**The Woman Who Walked into the Sea** (Avon, \$4.50) by Philip R. Craig takes us back to Martha's Vineyard for ex-cop Jeff Jackson's second case, the sequel to *A Beautiful Place to Die*. The woman of the title is an uncompromising university professor in her seventies who's on the island as a guest of another prof, one of Jackson's friends. Then one lovely morning she doesn't return from her daily swim, and another university colleague hires Jackson to investigate. Craig's island is more than a backdrop. It's a major character in a novel that is filled with strong characters, a complex plot, a sympathetic hero, and solid writing. Don't miss this one if you miss Ross Macdonald.

Annette Meyers' latest **Smith and Wetson** mystery takes Wetson, a former Broadway "gypsy" (read "dancer") turned Wall Street

headhunter, back to her roots in **Murder: The Musical** (Double-day Perfect Crime, \$18.50). Wetzon's best buddy and fellow dancer, Carlos, is finally choreographing his own bound-for-Broadway show, and he has invited Wetzon to a rehearsal. Nostalgia quickly takes a back seat, however, to Wetzon's real vocation—amateur sleuthing—when she discovers the body of the troupe's bossy stage manager in the balcony. Wall Street's ruthless shenanigans begin to look like child's play next to the million dollar machinations backstage at a Broadway show, whose "angels" are anything but, and whose stars make Smith and Wetzon's top clients look like modest schoolboys. And not only is Carlos' career at stake, but Smith's teenage son begins to look like the prime suspect. *Murder: The Musical* is the fifth in this snappy, unusual series, which always gives readers an insider's view of New York City, the world of Wall Street, and the daily life of a smart and immensely likeable single professional woman. Annette Meyers has created one of the most fascinating and entertaining series featuring a female amateur sleuth on bookstore shelves these days.

R. D. Zimmerman reprises his brother and sister sleuths from *Death Trance* in **Blood Trance** (Morrow, \$20), a mesmerizing journey into the darkest chambers of the human heart. Maddy was a brilliant forensic hypnotist and psychologist who had adjusted to the gradual loss in her teens of her eyesight. But when a traffic accident also confined her to a wheelchair, she dropped her practice and retired to semiseclusion on an island estate in Lake Michigan. Her younger brother Alex has become her eyes and ears and legs. Thus, she dispatches her reluctant brother to Chicago when she becomes concerned about Loretta, a former patient. Alex confirms Maddy's fears when Loretta's stepmother is murdered. Now it remains for him to do the legwork and present his big sister with his findings. Maddy must draw the conclusions, but she must first face down her own private demons. And she must work quickly, because the evil is not going to be halted by Maddy's little moat, even if it is the size of Lake Michigan. Fans of Jonathan Kellerman will appreciate this Edgar-nominated author's combination of crime and the science used in its detection.

Ruth Rendell and Marcia Muller have recently added titles to their ongoing series, and both live up to their own high standards. Britain's Chief Inspector Reginald Wexford returns in **Kissing the Gunner's Daughter** (Mysterious Press, \$5.50), in which he's assigned to a case of mass murder. An unknown assailant has entered the estate of an esteemed woman writer and has murdered her,

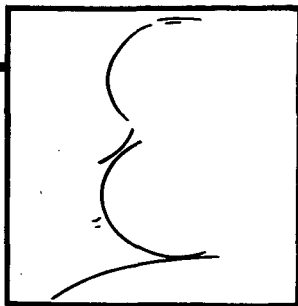
her husband, and her grown daughter, leaving only a badly wounded and shocked sixteen-year-old granddaughter alive. As Reg investigates, he must also struggle with a growing estrangement between himself and his favorite daughter Sheila over her latest choice in men. Don't wait years for P. D. James' next book; read Ruth Rendell's Wexford novels right now. They're generally shorter, there are more of them, and they're every bit as good. Muller's latest Sharon McCone is a bit of a departure, perhaps, and teases fans with promises of more changes to come. In **Wolf in the Shadows** (Mysterious Press, \$18.95), Sharon finds herself investigating the disappearance of her lover Hy, which jeopardizes her long-held job with All Souls Legal Cooperative. This time Sharon must play with the big boys—a multimillionaire's kidnapers, a mobster and his thugs, the border patrol, and the tough and experienced operatives of a rich and powerful P.I. firm. I won't tell you how she fares, for therein lies the tale. I will tell you that you'll find *Wolf in the Shadows* extremely hard to put down.

**Still Explosion** by Mary Logue (Seal Press, \$18.95) introduces Laura Malloy, a Twin Cities reporter who's literally on the scene when a bomb goes off in a clinic that has been under siege by protesting pro-lifers. But was this actually the work of Lifeline, the group that follows the charismatic Tom Chasen? Was the victim, the boyfriend of a young girl who was scheduled for an abortion that morning, really a victim at all; or was he, in fact, there to plant the pipe bomb when it accidentally exploded? Malloy has brains, curiosity, a generous helping of empathy, and an aversion to soapboxes of any color. In *Still Explosion*, Logue has crafted a fast-paced whodunit around a very topical subject: the potential for violence that is a partner to intolerance. The question ultimately becomes: who is the real victim when opposition turns into radicalism and hate?

On a similar theme is Nancy Baker Jacobs' latest Devon MacDonald case, **The Silver Scalpel** (Putnam, \$21.95), although Jacobs puts an entirely different spin on the tale. A teenager hires Devon to find out what happened to her younger sister Kerry, who left her small Minnesota town by bus to go to the Twin Cities. Molly fears that Kerry is the unclaimed victim of the fire-bombing of an abortion clinic. Even if Devon can prove Molly wrong, there still remains the question of where Kerry went after she boarded the bus. This is a snappy missing persons case with a sharp investigator on a very sinister trail.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**F**ollowing the letter of the law is a key to Sidney Pollack's **The Firm**. The film hardly follows the popular, bestselling John Grisham novel to the letter, though.

Is that a crime? Probably not when you consider that the book is five hundred pages long. Pollack's briefer version still takes two hours and thirty-four minutes. Telling the real tale might have taken twice as long.

Though he skips over much of the novel's sprawling plot in favor of a neater dash to moral high ground, the director does preserve the integrity of Grisham's characters.

Our hero is Mitch McDeere, a coalminer's son who desperately wants to be powerful and wealthy. He's working his way through Harvard Law School, juggling part-time jobs while he climbs to the top of his class.

Dreams of Wall Street dance

in his head—until recruiters from a small Memphis law firm pay a call. They offer him enough money to live like a king, a company car, and a beautiful house. He and his lovely wife Abby will be treated like part of the family. No lawyer in the firm, they're told, has ever been divorced. And not one has quit.

Attorneys at Bendini, Lambert & Locke do seem somewhat accident prone, however. Several have died through tragic mishaps. But McDeere ignores the red flags. After all, the firm is paying off his student loans.

It takes only a few minutes of this movie for young McDeere to realize that the family he's joined is the Moralto crime family of Chicago. The mahogany desks, the barbecues, and the shiny new Mercedes are a facade. Members of the firm are Moralto foot sol-

diers who know the Mafia's ev-ery trick.

The only way any attorney has left the firm is six feet under, and McDeere is in trouble up to his neck. The FBI wants him to be its mole, but the case it makes isn't very compelling. The remainder of the movie takes our hero through myriad locales while he tries to bring the criminals to their knees before they break both of his. Along the way, viewers meet up with the best supporting cast since Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*. Both big stars and unknowns shine here.

Veteran star Gene Hackman plays crooked and lecherous lawyer Avery Tolar in a way that makes him human and even likeable. Tolar is, for McDeere, a glimpse of what the future holds for the young attorney should he stay in this crooked enterprise.

Gary Busey is stellar as down-and-out private eye Eddie Lomax. Although he soon disappears, he leaves a lasting impression.

Ed Harris plays FBI agent Tarrance with grit, although his character and those of the other lawmen depart from Grisham's depictions. In the novel, the Feds' worst crime is ineptness. But Pollack's version of Uncle Sam's agents casts them in a more evil light.

David Straithairn is quiet and somewhat detached as McDeere's blacksheep, jailbird brother. His work leaves you wanting more.

Tom Cruise and Jeanne Tripplehorn play the McDeeres sensitively and with competence, though they hardly make the screen sizzle with their passion.

All told, though, it's Holly Hunter who steals the show as a fast-talking, tough-as-nails Memphis secretary married to a truck driver who thinks he's Elvis. She's ready to help save the day—not to mention the movie.

*The Firm*, the film, lacks the taut suspense of the original Grisham story. In fact, a trip or two to the concession stand won't leave you in the dark when it comes to following the plot. That's not to say it's not a solid movie. If you're looking for an easy, entertaining way to spend a large block of time, see *The Firm*.

But don't come down too hard on Sidney Pollack and the rest of his capable film crew for not parroting the literary effort to the letter. Remember, while the book did top the bestseller lists, it's hardly the Great American Novel; it's more like a diversion for a lazy summer day.

And that is where the movie is exactly like the book from which it is adapted.



# THE STORY THAT WON



The June Mysterious Photo-Virginia Thompson of Alameda, California; Sharlon Bur-Jodi Wolfrum of Durham, North Carolina; Canyon Lake, California; Calson of Wellesley, Massachusetts; Longwood, Florida; Sean Padraic Keohane of Orlando, Florida; Thomas Buice of Belleview, Florida; Alice Didier of Melville, New York; and Al Pennington of Yucca Valley, California.

graph contest was won by meda, California. Honorable ton of Armona, California; New Hampshire; Terry E. ifornia; Barbara Allen Simp- setts; Todd H. Latoski of

Photo by Myrna J. Yancey

## THE CASE OF THE BARKING TREES by Virginia Thompson

"My wife's like that. Can't tell white birch from palm trees."

The FBI agent glanced glumly, silently, at the speaker, a short, skinny, weatherbeaten older man with whom he trudged on a wooded California trail.

"You'd think local sheriff's boys would've noticed. Stood out like sore thumbs to me.

"Ranchers sometimes wrap trees with wire to keep cows and deer from destroying bark by chewing and rubbing. I knew right away this was no ordinary wrap.

"Clever idea, though. If insects didn't get it. Probably wouldn't through rubberized cloth, but insects are tough. Got to know your insects."

"Mr. Jones, please get to the point," interjected the agent.

"Right there."

Two tall trees stood in a clearing, lower bark wound with wire strands.

"The bank robbers tied the money in thin, flat bags to the trees, then wired strips of bark from old logs on top of it.

"Just one problem. Trees they picked are Australian eucalyptus with long thin bark. Those trees do everything upside down. Lose their bark every year and keep their leaves.

"Naturally, when I saw two naked eucalyptus tree trunks wrapped with oak bark, I investigated. There was the money. You might say the robbers barked up the wrong trees."

Jones halted and stared at the FBI agent's blank expression.

"They train you in FBI school to look serious, right?"

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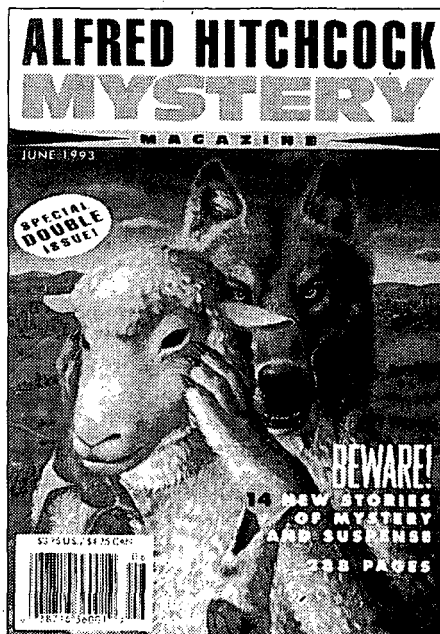
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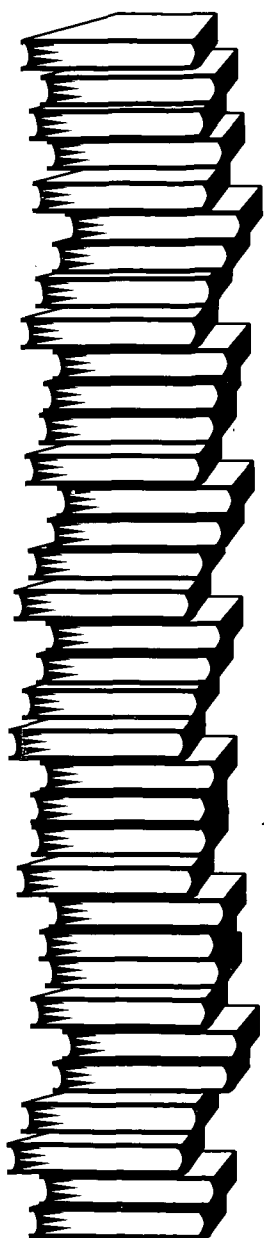
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